

Disability Terminology Quick Guide

Focus on the individual, not on his or her disability, which is only one facet of the person. In all cases try to keep the person's disability in proper perspective, without unduly magnifying its importance.

Put people first, not their disability. When speaking or writing, say *woman with arthritis, children who are deaf, people with disabilities*. Crippled, deformed, suffers from, afflicted by, victim of the retarded, infirm, etc., are never acceptable.

Emphasize abilities, not limitations. Consider *uses a wheelchair or walks with crutches* rather than confined to a wheelchair or crippled. Avoid use of inappropriate emotional descriptors such as unfortunate or pitiful.

Portray successful people with disabilities as successful people, not super humans. Even though the public may admire super achievers, portraying people with disabilities as superstars raises false expectations that all people with disabilities should achieve at this level.

Be accurate in describing disabilities. For example, people who had polio and experience after effects years later have a post polio disability. They do not have a disease. Reference to disease associated with a disability is acceptable only with chronic diseases, **such as arthritis, Parkinson's disease, or multiple sclerosis**. **People with disabilities should not be referred to as "patients" or "cases" unless the relationship with their doctor is being discussed.**

DON'Ts AND DOs

- Don't use "victim of," "victim," "afflicted with," "suffers from," "stricken with." **Do write,** "has" (or "had") if relevant to story; otherwise, don't use at all.
- Don't use "confined to a wheelchair." **Do write,** "in a (uses a) wheelchair."
- Don't use "wheelchair-bound," "prisoner of," "abnormal," "defective," "invalid." **Use** nothing; no term is needed.
- Don't use "special" bus, "special" bathroom. **Do write,** "separate bus," "segregated bathroom."
- Don't use "physically (or mentally) challenged." **Do write,** "person with a disability" or "disabled person."
- Don't use "inconvenienced." **Do write,** "person with a disability" or "disabled person."
- Don't use "handicapped." **Do write,** "person with a disability" or "disabled person."
- Don't use "deaf-mute." **Do write,** "deaf"; "hearing impaired."
- Don't use "in spite of disability." **Avoid** the concept altogether.
- Don't use "overcame her handicap." **Avoid** the concept altogether.
- Don't use "handicapped parking." **Do write,** "accessible parking."
- Don't use "disabled seating." **Do write,** "seating for viewers in wheelchairs."

| Examples of positive and negative phrases | |
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| Positive Phrases | Negative Phrases |
| person who is blind; person who is visually impaired | the blind |
| person with a disability | the disabled, handicapped |
| person who is deaf; person who is hearing impaired or hard of hearing | suffers a hearing loss |
| person who has multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, etc. | afflicted by MS, CP victim, stricken by MD |
| person with intellectual disabilities | retarded, mentally defective |
| person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder | epileptic |
| person who uses a wheelchair | confined or restricted to a wheelchair |
| person without disabilities | normal person (implies that person with a disability isn't normal) |
| congenital disability | birth defect |
| person who has a cleft lip or cleft palate | hare lip |
| Down syndrome | mongol or mongoloid |
| person with a learning disability | slow learner, retarded |
| physically disabled | crippled, lame, deformed |
| unable to speak, uses synthetic speech | dumb, mute |
| Seizure | fit |
| successful, productive | has overcome his or her disability; courageous (when it implies the person has courage because of having a disability) |
| person with mental illness, person with psychiatric disability | crazy, nuts |
| person who no longer lives in an institution | the deinstitutionalized |

"DISABLED" AND "DISABILITY" TERMS OF CHOICE

Most people involved in disability issues today see "disabled" or "disability" as terms of choice. Many want journalists to write "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person." Today, most disability groups are changing the "handicap" in their titles to "disability."

"OVERCOMING" "IN SPITE OF"

The terms "overcame her disability" or "in spite of his handicap" are considered to be flawed and should be avoided. These concepts inaccurately reflect the problems disabled people face.

Disabled people do not succeed "in spite of" their disabilities as much as they succeed "in spite of" an inaccessible and discriminatory society. They do not "overcome" their handicaps so much as "overcome" prejudice. Using the term "overcome" inaccurately suggests that the task at hand is for a disabled person to somehow solve discrimination by himself or herself.

A "SPECIAL" NOTE

The term "special" as in "special education" has been, is, and will be used to refer to efforts made to meet group and individual educational needs. However, the term "special" has come to be used as a euphemism for segregated programs or physical facilities that are almost always inferior to what is available to non-disabled individuals. "Special" has definite negative connotations within the disability rights movement.

If you are using the term "special" to mean "separate," use "separate" instead. Instead of writing, "special buses for the disabled," write, "separate buses for disabled people." For "special handicap bathroom," write, "separate bathroom."

If you are using the term "special" to mean "disabled," use "disabled" or "disability" instead.

In general, avoid the term, except when you must refer to it as part of a title, such as Special Olympics or Department of Special Education.

*Sources: Nebraska Health and Human Services System
(<http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/poc/cls/disguides.htm>; Ragged Edge online
(<http://www.raggededgemagazine.com/mediacircus/styleguide.htm>)*