

Disability Language Guide



Photo Credit: Linda A. Cicero / Stanford News Service

Image Description: Three students (a man carrying a flag, a man using a wheelchair, and a woman speaking with hand gestures) have a conversation while walking on a Stanford road.

Language is dynamic and nuanced, changing at a rapid pace along with social norms, perceptions, and opportunities for inclusion. The following, written by Labib Rahman and reviewed and approved by the Stanford Disability Initiative, is a starter guide (non-exhaustive, non-definitive) for considering disability equity (and practicing deference to individual experiences) in the words we use as an institutional community. Published July 2019.

Words matter

The words we use to describe individuals with disabilities matters. According to the World Health Organization, the disability community is the largest minority group in the world: around 10% of the world's population, or 650 million people, live with a disability making the disability community the largest minority group in the world. Although there is not a monolithic language style preference shared across all the people who have a disability, it remains important to use respectful and inclusive language when communicating with or talking about people with disabilities.

1. Be mindful of the diversity in the disability community

Disability is diverse both in terms of conditions and the people who have them. With all the differences in cultures, languages, genders, beliefs, and environments, remember that it is possible for two people with the same diagnosis or circumstance to feel completely differently about their disability.

2. Ask individuals what language they would like used to describe their disability

If someone is willing to disclose their disability, it is best to ask them how they want you to refer to (or not refer to) their disability. In addition to word choice, it is important to note that people may want different levels of disclosure. In other words, some people may feel more comfortable discussing their disabilities than others or may feel differently about disclosure in different situations.

3. Learn about the two major linguistic preferences to address disability

Putting the person first, as in “people with disability,” is called people-first language. It is commonly used to reduce the dehumanization of disability. Another popular linguistic prescription is the identity-first language, as in “disabled people.” Many use this style to celebrate disability pride and identity or simply because they prefer this. There is no unanimity on which is the more respectful style, it comes down to personal preference. One suggested middle-ground is to use these two styles interchangeably to acknowledge and respect the individual preferences of an exceptionally diverse group of people.

4. Avoid condescending euphemisms

Terms like *differently-abled*, *challenged*, and *handi-capable* are often considered condescending. By shying away from mentioning disability, we may reinforce the notion that disability is something of which to be ashamed. The word *special* is a particularly entrenched because it can be used as a euphemism but also may be utilized technically (e.g., “special education”). There is a desire to move away from this word. However, there is also acknowledgement that terms such as “special needs” are uniquely situated to introduce non-disabled parents and loved ones of children with disabilities to a rich and complex world of disability access, inclusion, accommodation rights, and systems of support.

5. Avoid offensive language – even as a joke

Examples of offensive terms: *mad*, *freak*, *psycho*, *retard*, *lame*, *imbecile*, *crazy*. Don’t call someone “a retard” or “retarded” if they do something silly, unwise, thoughtless, short-sighted, dangerous, ill-advised, frustrating, etc. Other examples include asking someone jokingly, “Are you deaf/blind?” “Can’t you see/hear?”

6. Describing people without disabilities

Do not use words that suggest undesirable stereotypes of people with disability. When describing people without disabilities, don’t use terms like *normal*, *healthy*, *able-bodied*. Instead, use “non-disabled” or “people without visible disabilities.” Such terms are more accurate, because we often cannot tell whether someone has a disability just by their physical appearance.

7. Not all disabilities are illnesses and not all people with disabilities are patients

People with disabilities can be healthy even if they have a chronic condition like diabetes. It is only appropriate to refer to someone as a patient in a medical setting, regardless of their disability status.

It is also important to recognize that wellness is an individual endeavor: people with disabilities experience wellness, physical/health fitness, and recreational activities at myriad levels. No person, regardless of ability or desire to participate in wellness activities, is more or less deserving of dignity and respect.

8. People with disabilities simply living their lives do not exist to inspire others

Successful disabled people should be celebrated in much the same way as successful non-disabled people are. Depicting everyone with a disability in unsophisticated, feel-good ways for touching the hearts and opening the minds of non-disabled people is both objectifying and degrading. In her TedX talk, Stella Young dubbed this concept “[inspiration porn](#).”

9. Do not mention someone’s disability unless it is essential to the story

It is OK to identify a person’s disability when it is necessary for clarity or provides important information. For instance, “Virali, who uses a wheelchair, spoke about her experience with using accessible transportation” is totally fine, since it adds a new layer to the story. In other instances, the disability may be irrelevant. For example, do not say, “Charles, who has a congenital disability, wants more sugar in his caramel espresso.”

Now let’s shed some respectful light on a few commonly-used terms.

Commonly-used Terms	Preferred Language
Able-bodied, Normal	<p>Use “non-disabled” or “person without disability.”</p> <p>Referring to someone who does not have a disability as a “normal person” implies that people with disabilities are strange or odd.</p> <p>Use “normal” only in medical/scientific context such as “normal test result” or “normal growth.”</p>
Abnormal	Use “atypical”, “disabled person” or “person with disability.”

	<p>Use abnormal only in a medical/scientific setting like “abnormal curvature of bone.” Avoid using the word “abnormal” to describe people.</p>
<p>Addict, Alcoholic, Junkie</p>	<p>Use “someone with a drug/alcohol addiction” or “someone with alcoholism.”</p> <p>Addiction is a neurobiological disease which “impaired control over drug use, compulsive use, and continued use despite harm and/or craving.”</p> <p>Use “recovery and/or remission” when someone is trying to get out their addiction.</p>
<p>Blind</p>	<p>Use “blind” for someone who has complete loss of sight.</p> <p>Use “legally blind” for someone who has almost complete loss of sight.</p> <p>Use “limited vision,” “low vision,” “partially sighted,” “visually impaired” for someone who is neither legally or completely blind.</p> <p>Note: Some people object to “visually impaired” as it characterizes the condition in terms of lacking.</p>

Brain-damaged	Use “person with a brain injury.”
Defect, Defective	<p>Use “person with a congenital disability,” “person living with congenital disability.”</p> <p>When describing a disability, avoid “defect” or “defective” as they imply the person is sub-par or incomplete.</p>
Mad, Psycho, Deranged, Retarded	Use “people with mental illness.”
Cripple, Crip	<p>Avoid unless someone wants to be described as such.</p> <p>Although some disability activists have reclaimed the terms, there are many others who consider them offensive, so allies and non-disabled people should not use them out of respect.</p>
Deaf	<p>Use “deaf and hard of hearing community” when referring to the community of people with all kinds of hearing loss.</p> <p>Use capitalized “Deaf” when referring to Deaf culture and the community of Deaf people.</p>

	<p>Use “partial hearing loss” or “partially deaf” for those who have some hearing loss.</p> <p>Avoid “deaf and dumb” and “deaf-mute” since people with speech and hearing disabilities can express themselves “in writing, through sign language, and in other ways.” [NCDJ] The term “hearing impaired” is also not recommended.</p>
Differently-abled, Special, Gifted	<p>Use “person with disability” or “disabled person” instead.</p> <p>Terms like “differently-abled,” although well-meaning, can be received as “condescending, offensive or simply a way of avoiding talking about disability” [NCDJ].</p>
Vertically challenged, Midget	<p>Use “dwarf,” “someone with dwarfism/short stature” or “little person.”</p>
Handicap, Handicapped	<p>When describing a person, use “person with a disability” or “disabled person” instead.</p> <p>Regulations or places like “handicapped parking” are generally acceptable. However, it’s more preferred to use the terms like “accessible parking.”</p>

Special needs	<p>“Functional needs” is preferred.</p> <p>The term “special” in connection to people with disabilities runs the risk of euphemistically stigmatizing disabled people’s differences. The notion is that despite differences in everyone’s needs, referring to the needs of only disabled people as “special” carries an infantilizing connotation.</p>
Suffers from/victim of/stricken with	<p>Use of neutral language like “they have/are living with muscular dystrophy” is preferred to “they suffer from muscular dystrophy.”</p> <p>A general rule of thumb is to avoid terms that “connote pity” [AP Stylebook].</p>
Wheelchair-bound	Use “wheelchair user” or “person who uses a wheelchair.”
Mental Retardation	Use “person with an intellectual disability.”

Sources National Center on Disability and Journalism, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), AP Stylebook