

BEST PRACTICES: DISABILITY-RELATED LANGUAGE

Avoid outdated and offensive terms

There are a number of **terms for people with disabilities** that are outdated, ableist, and potentially offensive to members of the disability community, including but not limited to:

- “differently abled”
- “handicapped”
- “physically challenged”
- “special needs”*
- “wheelchair-bound” (as opposed to “wheelchair user”)
- “invalid”

These terms carry **negative connotations**, either because they serve as euphemisms or because they suggest that people with disabilities have a worse quality of life than people without. Avoid these terms and replace them with more appropriate, specific terms.

Also consider how you describe **people who aren’t disabled**. Just as there are appropriate terms to use when talking about people with disabilities, there are appropriate terms for people without disabilities. Avoid language like “normal,” “able,” or “able-bodied”; these terms inappropriately suggest that those with disabilities are abnormal or do not have able bodies. Instead, use terms like “people without disabilities,” “nondisabled,” or “enabled.”

When talking about spaces that have been designed to accommodate people with physical disabilities, refer to these as **accessible spaces** – for example, an “accessible bathroom” rather than a “handicapped bathroom.”

People-first vs. identity-first

Learn whether to use “**people-first**” or “**identity-first**” language. Just as with any other group, people with disabilities are not all the same. They are multifaceted human beings and not an easily categorized group. To reflect this variation and individuality, we should use person-first language whenever possible—for example, “a person with dyslexia” rather than “a dyslexic person.”

However, some communities do prefer identity-first language. For example, many people in the deaf community prefer the term “deaf person” to the “person who is hard of hearing,” and many people in the autism community prefer the term “autistic person.” **Always use the individual’s preferred terms.**

Be specific

Where possible, refer to a person's specific disability rather than grouping different disability types together. The range of existing disabilities varies wildly, and individuals with disabilities have very different experiences depending on their condition and a host of factors. Also avoid using the phrase "the disabled." Instead, when discussing a person's disability, use words that refer to their **specific condition**—for instance, as a person with ADHD—to respect their unique experience and needs.

Respect individual preferences

While there are generally accepted terms to use when talking about disability, different people have different preferences. For example, people with dwarfism often prefer terms like "person of short stature" or "little person." Learn the individual preferences of people in your community.

Note: *This guide is up to date as of July 2023, but please be aware that language surrounding disability is subject to evolving societal understanding and preferences, and therefore may change over time.*