



Disability and Language: Choosing Words That Show Respect

The words we use when talking about disability can shape expectations before we ever meet someone. Descriptions that invite pity, suggest helplessness, or reduce a person to a diagnosis can reinforce assumptions about that person's abilities and life.

Respectful language begins with recognizing each person's individuality. A disability may be relevant to a conversation, but so may someone's work, interests, relationships, and experiences—and often those are the details that matter most.

Understand Person-First and Identity-First Language

Person-first language places the person before the disability, as in “a person with epilepsy” or “a person with a disability.” This approach emphasizes that a diagnosis or condition is one aspect of a person's life.

Identity-first language, such as “disabled person,” “autistic person,” or “Deaf person,” is also preferred by many people. Some regard disability as an important part of their identity or community, so respecting someone's own terminology matters more than applying one rule to everyone. [NIH guidance on person-first and identity-first language](#)

Let People Describe Themselves

When someone tells you how they prefer to be described, follow that preference. If disability is relevant and you are unsure which wording to use, a simple, respectful question can prevent

assumptions.

Preferences also vary within disability communities. One person may prefer “blind person,” while another prefers “person who is blind”; neither person’s choice establishes a universal rule for everyone with a similar disability. [NIH disability language guidance](#)

Choose Clear Descriptions Over Euphemisms

Disability does not need to be softened with phrases such as “differently abled” or “physically challenged.” Direct terms can communicate more clearly, while euphemisms may sound uncomfortable or patronizing.

When a comparison is relevant, “person without a disability” or “nondisabled person” is generally more precise than “normal person.” Likewise, “healthy” is not a substitute for “nondisabled,” because disability and health are not interchangeable concepts. [National Center on Disability and Journalism language guide](#)

Describe Communication Accurately

Hearing and speech are separate, and a description of one should not be used to make assumptions about the other. A person who is deaf may speak, use sign language, communicate through writing, or use several methods depending on the situation.

Similarly, a nonspeaking person may communicate through a device, gestures, typing, or other methods. Describe the method when it matters—for example, “she uses a communication device”—and allow the person time to respond without assuming that speech reflects understanding or intelligence.

Recognize Mobility Aids as Tools

A wheelchair, cane, or pair of crutches can support someone’s mobility and independence. Phrases such as “uses a wheelchair” or “walks with crutches” describe those tools without assuming that the person is trapped or helpless.

Terms such as “wheelchair-bound” and “confined to a wheelchair” impose a limiting interpretation on someone else’s experience. Neutral wording leaves room for the person to explain what mobility equipment means in their own life. [National Center on Disability and Journalism language guide](#)

Avoid Assumptions About Suffering or Achievement

Descriptions such as “suffers from” or “is a victim of” can introduce pity that the person has not expressed. Saying someone “has” a condition usually communicates the relevant information more accurately, while still allowing people to speak honestly about pain or difficulties when those are part of their experience.

The same care applies to praise. Recognize a person's accomplishment on its own merits, and discuss disability when it contributes meaningfully to the story rather than automatically describing every achievement as overcoming adversity.

Name the Barrier Clearly

When discussing accessibility, identify the obstacle that prevents participation. A staircase without an accessible alternative, a video without captions, or a doorway too narrow for a mobility device gives readers concrete information about the problem.

Specific descriptions also make solutions easier to understand. Explaining that someone cannot enter a business because its entrance has steps directs attention toward access and the changes needed to provide it.

Make Respect Part of Everyday Conversation

Friends, neighbors, colleagues, customers, and family members do not need to be introduced by a disability when it has no bearing on the conversation. Use the same care you would want others to take when describing you, including respect for privacy and personal preferences.

If you use a term someone dislikes, acknowledge the correction briefly and adjust your wording. Listening, accepting feedback, and carrying that respect into everyday actions help create more welcoming communities.

d

d. people with disabilities

2. How should you refer to a person who has no disability?

- a. a normal person.
- b. a healthy person
- c. a person without a disability
- d. a typical person

3. A person born with a disability should be referred to as:

- a. a person with a birth defect
- b. a person who has a congenital disability
- c. either a or b above
- d. neither a nor b above

4. How does a disability advocate refer to someone unable to speak or hear?

- a. a deaf mute
- b. dumb

- c. a person who is unable to speak, a person who uses a communication device.
- d. a sign-language user

5. True or false: It is acceptable to refer to people who are blind or visually impaired as “the blind.”

6. Emphasizing abilities rather than limitations would include which of the following descriptions?

- a. A man walks with crutches.
- b. A woman is crippled.
- c. Some people succeed despite their disability.
- d. A person suffers from an unfortunate disability.

7. The term “handicap” should be used in the following sense:

- a. To describe a person with a disability.
- b. To refer to a barrier in the environment.
- c. Never use the term. It is inappropriate.
- d. Use it to describe the person as well as the environment.

8. When is it okay to refer to a person as “bound to” or “confined by” a wheelchair?

- a. Never. Wheelchairs are actually liberating.
- b. Never. Wheelchairs provide mobility.
- c. Never. Wheelchairs break the confinement of a person who cannot walk.
- d. All the above.

9. Euphemisms such as “physically challenged,” “inconvenienced” or “differently abled” are:

- a. condescending and are to be avoided.
- b. cute enough to be used around children.
- c. okay when used with good intentions.
- d. to be used in place of terms like “retarded” or “crippled.”

10. Generally, using People First Language, what do you call people with disabilities?

- a. the disabled
- b. the handicapped community.
- c. any other term you would use for a person (friend, neighbor, Uncle Bob, etc.)

d. All of the above.

Your answer key:

1-d: The idea is to refer to what a person has, rather than what a person is.

2-c: This is the reverse application of the principle mentioned in question 1, above.

3-b: This one is far more objective and less stereotypical than “a person with a birth defect.”

4-c: If you got this one correct, you’re catching on! Describe the person by how the disability affects his or her abilities.

5-False. Shame on you if you missed this one! We refer to people with visual disabilities simply as “people who are blind” or “a person who is visually impaired.”

6-a: Notice the more positive connotation of what a person with a disability can do rather than what the limitations are?

7-b: Use the word in the sense that people with disabilities who use wheelchairs are handicapped by a lack of accommodations.

8-d: Okay. This was an easy one. Notice how the idea of the wheelchair can be of freedom and mobility?

9-a. Stay away from cute euphemisms. You’re dealing with people here.

10-c: People with disabilities are just people. Refer to them the same way you would to any other person.

If you did well on this quiz, it is because you figured out that to be an access advocate you first need truly regard a person with a handicap as a person. Looking for help in figuring out whether your local businesses and public facilities are removing barriers? Contact us. We advocate on behalf of people who want nothing more than to lead a productive life.