

People First Language

Style Guide



A reference for media
professionals and the public

What is People First Language?

People First Language (also referred to as “Person First”) is an accurate way of referring to a person with a disability. This style guide offers an alphabetical list of standard terms that balance the need for clarity and sensitivity by focusing on the person instead of the disability. It is not a complete list but a general representation of terms people with disabilities commonly find respectable.

Why People First Language?

Words have a profound impact on shaping attitudes and perceptions. Incorporating People First Language demonstrates people are unique and their abilities or disabilities are part of who they are, not a definition of who they are. People First Language is sensitive and accurate. It helps break down community barriers to foster acceptance, mutual respect and open lines of communication.

Tips for Incorporating People First Language

Some disability groups object to different phrases for varying reasons. Even among people with disabilities and their families, a variety of terms are used and accepted. It is best to ask the person which words or phrases are acceptable to them.

Avoid using descriptions that connote pity, such as “afflicted with” or “suffers from,” because these terms carry the assumption that the person with a disability is living a reduced quality of life. It is preferable to use neutral language when describing a person with a disability.

When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is best to emphasize abilities rather than limitations, and focus on a person’s accomplishments, creative talents or skills. That doesn’t mean you should avoid mentioning a disability or describing the impact it has had on the person’s life. Always refer to the person and the disability he or she has respectfully and accurately.

Refer to the Quick Guide on the back page for an overview of common words to use and avoid.

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A

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Involves learning and behavioral challenges that do not have any serious underlying physical or mental causes. It is characterized by difficulty in sustaining attention, impulsive behavior and excessive activity.

DO USE: child with ADHD

DON'T USE: hyperactive

Autism. A developmental disability originating in infancy. Autism and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development characterized by difficulties in social interaction, language dysfunction and repetitive behaviors.

DO USE : child with autism, she has autism, "on the spectrum"

DON'T USE: autistic child

B

Blind. Describes a person with complete loss of sight. For others, use terms such as visually impaired or person with low vision.

DO USE: person with visual impairments, boy who is blind

DON'T USE: the blind, blind person

Brain injury. A temporary or long-term disruption in brain function resulting from injury to the brain. Difficulties with cognitive, physical, emotional and/or social functioning may occur.

DO USE: person who has a brain injury, woman who sustained a brain injury, boy with an acquired brain injury

DON'T USE: brain damaged, suffers from brain damage

C

Cerebral palsy (CP). Refers to a number of neurological disorders that appear at birth, in infancy or early childhood and permanently affect body movement and muscle coordination, but don't worsen over time.

DO USE: a person with cerebral palsy, he/she has cerebral palsy

DON'T USE: cerebral palsy victim, cerebral palsied, spastic, a CP

Congenital disability. A disability present since birth.

DO USE: has a congenital disability, was born with a disability, has had a disability since birth

DON'T USE: birth defect, defective

D

Deaf. Describes a person with profound or complete hearing loss. Language often develops differently from those who have hearing. Many people who are hearing impaired have mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. There is no uniform terminology, so it is best to ask the person which term is suitable.

DO USE: Hearing impaired, woman who is deaf, boy who is hard of hearing, partially deaf

DON'T USE: deaf and dumb, deaf mute

Developmental disabilities. An intellectual or physical disability that occurs at birth or before age 22, is expected to be life-long and affects one or more major life activities. It is an umbrella term.

DO USE: an individual with: a disability, autism, epilepsy, a brain injury, etc.

DON'T USE: retarded, disabled, handicapped, autistic, epileptic, brain damaged

Disability. A general term used for a functional limitation that can interfere with a person's ability to walk, lift, hear, see, learn, comprehend or complete other tasks. It may be physical, sensory or intellectual. Disability and people with disabilities are not monolithic. Avoid referring to "the disabled" as a singular group.

DO USE: person with a disability

DON'T USE: handicapped, the mentally or physically disabled, special, retarded, mental retardation

Down syndrome. Describes a chromosomal irregularity that results in a delay in physical, intellectual and language development.

DO USE: person with Down syndrome

DON'T USE: Mongol, Mongoloid, Down's baby

H

Handicap. Should not be used when describing a disability. In recent years, advocates have been successful in removing the word “handicap” from parking signs and other public areas. “Accessible” is the preferred term in those situations.

DO USE: person with a disability, accessible entrance

DON'T USE: she is handicapped, a handicap parking space

L

Learning disability. Anything that permanently affects how a person processes, retains and expresses information.

DO USE: a child with a learning disability, she has learning disability

DON'T USE: slow, slow learner, retarded

Little people/person. Refers to people of short stature, below 4 feet 10 inches. Groups focusing on this issue are often divided between using “little person” or “dwarf,” as some people are offended by those terms and others are not.

DO USE: ask the person who is being written or talked about

DON'T USE: midget, vertically challenged

M

Mental retardation. A term no longer accepted, even as a medical diagnosis. It should not be used. Advocates have been successful in getting this phrase removed from federal and state laws.

Mental illness. An umbrella term for different conditions that affect how individuals act, think, feel or perceive the world. Specific disorders are types of mental illness and should be used whenever possible. Do not describe an individual as mentally ill unless it is clearly pertinent to a story and the diagnosis is properly sourced.

DO USE: She has depression, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia

DON'T USE: insane, crazy/crazed, nuts, deranged, lunatic

Mute. Generally considered a derogatory term referring to a person who physically cannot speak because it implies people who do not use speech are unable to express themselves. Others with speaking difficulties are speech impaired. A person who does not use speech may be able to hear, and they may use written language or sign language.

DO USE: child who uses augmentive/assistive communication, she uses sign language, he does not speak

DON'T USE: mute, dumb

S

Seizure. An involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness resulting from something neurological like epilepsy or brain injury.

DO USE: person with a seizure disorder, person who had a seizure

DON'T USE: fit, spastic, epileptic

Spinal cord injury. Occurs when there has been permanent damage to the spinal cord. Quadriplegia is a substantial or significant loss of function in all four extremities. Paraplegia refers to substantial or significant loss of function in only the lower part of the body

DO USE: person with a spinal cord injury, person who has quadriplegia or paraplegia

DON'T USE: quadriplegic, paraplegic

Stroke. Caused by interruption of blood to the brain. Paralysis of one side, or hemiplegia, may result.

DO USE: person who had a stroke

DON'T USE: stroke victim

W

Wheelchair. People use wheelchairs for independent mobility and the equipment is considered part of their personal space. People who use wheelchairs have widely different disabilities and varying abilities.

DO USE: wheelchair user, person who uses a wheelchair

DON'T USE: wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair.

DO USE

DON'T USE

She has autism	Autistic child
Congenital disability	Birth defect
He is blind/visually impaired	Blind person
Person served/supported	Client/Consumer
She is deaf/hard of hearing	Deaf person
He has a disability (specify which one, if able)	Disabled, retard, handicapped, cripple
She has Down syndrome	Downs, Mongoloid
He has epilepsy	Epileptic
Accessible parking	Handicap parking
Little person/dwarf (ask the person his/her preference)	Midget
She doesn't speak/uses assistive communication	Mute/dumb
Uses a wheelchair	Wheelchair-bound



This style guide, updated in 2017, is produced by Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services and Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries. It aligns with definitions in the Associated Press Stylebook and the guide produced by the National Center on Disability and Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University.