

# Talking the talk of disability inclusion

This resource seeks to provide tips on rights-affirming language and narratives preferred by people with disabilities. It is intended to develop communications that affirm human dignity, reflect the power and autonomy of disabled people, and help advance disability justice and rights. This tool should be read alongside other learning resources.

Too often mass media reinforces negative disability narratives and stereotypes. Adding to the confusion, non-disabled people often have limited interaction with people with disabilities, which sometimes leaves them hesitant about language. This hinders the critical conversations, learning, and interactions necessary to strengthen disability inclusion in our organizations and communities. At the same time language is critical, it must also be paired with genuine changes in attitudes and practices that commit organizations to disability inclusion.

## Use the terms “disabled people” or “people with disabilities” not euphemisms.

Terms like “differently-abled,” “physically challenged,” “handicapable,” or “special” may be considered patronizing. In addition, avoiding the word “disability” can inadvertently reinforce stigma.



## Emphasize abilities and the need for accessibility.

Use language and narratives focused on the strength and agency of disabled people rather than on disease and medical interventions. Only mention a person’s disability when it is relevant to the story or context. Relatedly, accessible devices, such as wheelchairs or hearing aids, do not “confine” people with disabilities but advance inclusion and access. The term “accessible” is preferred to “handicapped,” which is outdated and unacceptable.

## Frame ableism and disability discrimination as a collective, systemic problem.

Ableism is a structural inequity and should be portrayed as such. Using the terms “overcome” or “in spite of” inaccurately suggests that the onus is on the disabled person to overcome discrimination through personal effort, or that a disability identity is inherently a problem to be solved. The problem is not the individual, but structural discrimination.

## Use words and framing that reflect political and social power.

People with disabilities are active community participants and leaders and should be portrayed as such. Communications should depict disabled people interacting with those with and without disabilities. Avoid using words that sensationalize disability or connote pity, such as “suffers from,” “victim of,” or group designations like “the blind.”

## Portray people with disabilities in a balanced way, not as heroic or inspiring.

It’s patronizing to portray a person with a disability as inspiring simply because they live their life, attend school, graduate from college, and go to work. When sharing stories about disabled people, avoid attributing their success to superhuman powers (also called “super cripp”), which may reinforce ideas that disabled people must be exceptional to be valued.

## Language guidance

AFFIRMATIVE	NEGATIVE
person with an intellectual disability	slow, mentally retarded, dim-witted
person with a psychiatric or psychosocial disability or with a mental health diagnosis	crazy, maniac, lunatic, moron, mad, demented, schizo, psycho, feeble-minded
person with a learning disability	slow learner, retarded, stupid
person with epilepsy or a seizure disorder	epileptic, spastic, person who has "fits"
accessible parking or accommodations	handicap accessible
children with disabilities	special needs children
non-disabled person, person without a disability	able-bodied, normal, whole
person with a physical disability	crippled, handicapped, deformed, lame
person with a spinal cord injury	quadriplegic, paraplegic, incapacitated
wheelchair-user	wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair
person who is blind or has low vision	the blind
Deaf, <sup>1</sup> hard of hearing	the deaf; deaf, dumb, and mute; hearing impaired
person of short stature, little person, dwarf	midget
person who had a stroke	stroke victim, suffered from a stroke
person with a congenital or developmental disability	deformed, person with a birth defect

*This is a sample, rather than a comprehensive list.*

### Resources

- [Ableism/Language](#) from Autistic Hoya
- [Beyond the AP Stylebook: Language and Usage Guide for Reporters and Editors](#) from Ragged Edge
- [Guidelines for Writing About People with Disabilities](#) from ADA National Network
- [Reporting and Writing About Disabilities](#) from National Disability Rights Network
- [Disability Language Style Guide](#) from the National Center on Disability and Journalism
- [Disability-Inclusive Development Toolkit](#) from CBM
- [Portrayal of People with Disabilities](#) from the Association of University Centers on Disability

*Any attempt to provide guidance on communications and language is fraught with the challenges of addressing complexity and may oversimplify interactions and communications that should be contextualized. If you have any feedback, suggestions, or questions about this document, please contact [Catherine Hyde Townsend](#), disability inclusion adviser.*

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<sup>1</sup> The uppercase "D" in "Deaf" is used to describe people who culturally identify as Deaf and share a common language, American Sign Language.