

“But I Don’t Have a Disability!”: Writing Inclusive Documents

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As technical communicators, we know just how important language is. Words can carry pejorative meanings and negative descriptions, and such words applied to groups of people can reinforce demeaning or inaccurate stereotypes and prejudices. This session aims to raise your awareness of current writing trends for acceptable or preferred terms for referring to various disabilities.

I have drawn from several key sources in the following discussion and guidelines. I list these sources at the end of the paper and suggest other useful resources to help you write correctly about people with disabilities.

Why pay attention to our writing about people with disabilities?

The website for the Asian & Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons asserts that “negative and patronizing language produces negative and patronizing images.” Technical communicators have both the opportunity and the responsibility to change negative and patronizing language. “Positive attitudes can be shaped through careful presentation of information about people with disabilities” (www.unescap.org/decade/terminology.htm).

We can exhibit positive attitudes in writing about people with disabilities with what is called people-first language. That is, by focusing on the person, not the disability, we encourage an inclusive and respectful attitude toward people. At the same time, we help to break down stereotypes that have been built on ignorance and fear.

Kathie Snow, author of *People First Language*, observes that every group is represented in the “largest minority group,” that of people with disabilities: both sexes, all races, all ages, all ethnic groups, all socioeconomic and educational levels. The only thing this diverse group of people has in common with each other, however, “is dealing with societal misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination.”

Moreover, Snow warns that anyone can join this minority group at any time: at birth, through an accident or illness, or as we age. Snow asks, “How will you want to be described? How will you want to be treated?” This personal point of view impels us to study how we use language to include or exclude people. Snow reminds us to “put the person *before* the disability” (www.disabilityisnatural.com).

What is the difference between a disability and a handicap?

The two terms are not synonymous. According to the Life Span Institute at the University of Kansas, “Disability is a general term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability, for example, to walk, lift, heal, or learn. It may refer to a physical, sensory, or mental condition.” Although the term handicap is no longer used in federal legislation, it “can be used when citing laws and situations, but should never be used to describe a person or disability” (www.lsi.ku.edu/lsi/internal/guidelines.html).

For example, a woman with a broken leg has a disability, however temporary; the stairs she cannot climb represent a handicap. Keep in mind that a “handicap” parking space aids people with physical disabilities, not emotional or cognitive ones. The preferred term for this use of handicap is accessible, such as an accessible restroom with Braille signs or a heavy, non-accessible door without a motorized opener.

How can we change stereotypes about people with disabilities?

The Research and Training Center on Independent Living has produced a detailed set of guidelines and terms preferred by a majority of disability organizations to help communicators write with sensitivity about people with disabilities. (See the complete Guidelines and examples at the Life Span Institute website, www.lsi.ku.edu/lsi/internal/guidelines.html.) These guidelines include the following don’ts and do’s:

- Don’t focus on the disability unless it is crucial to a story. Avoid tear-jerking human interest stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injury.
- Don’t portray successful people with disabilities as heroes because of, or in spite of, their disabilities. Similarly, don’t sensationalize disability or use emotional descriptors such as unfortunate, pitiful, and so forth. Avoid “tragic but brave” stereotypes.
- Don’t use generic labels for disability groups, such as “the retarded” or “the blind.” Emphasize people, not labels.
- Don’t use condescending euphemisms such as “differently abled” or “physically challenged.”
- Do show people with disabilities as active participants in society. Portraying persons with disabilities interacting with non-disabled people in social situations and work environments helps break down barriers and open lines of communication
- Do use the term nondisabled to refer to people without disabilities. Normal, able-bodied, temporarily able-bodied, healthy, or whole are inappropriate.

The authors of the Guidelines understand that repeatedly using long, awkward phrases can dull most writing. They offer this alternative:

Because of editorial pressures to be succinct, we know it is not always possible to put people first. If the portrayal is positive and accurate, consider the following variations: disabled citizens, nondisabled people, wheelchair-user, deaf girl, paralyzed child, and so on. Crippled, deformed, suffers from, victim of, the retarded, infirmed, the deaf and dumb, etc. are never acceptable under any circumstances. Also, do not use nouns to describe people, such as epileptic, diabetic, etc.
(www.lsi.ku.edu/lsi/internal/guidelines.html)

These final guidelines will help you understand how your writing can break down stereotypes and display sensitivity to people who are frequently marginalized or overlooked by society:

- Don't generalize by assuming that people with disabilities know each other or are all activists (McGowen, p. 90).
- Don't assume that all people with similar disability labels are impacted by the disability in the same way. (McGowen, p. 90). That is, a condition such as fibromyalgia can vary in severity and symptoms from one person to the next, and even for a person from one day to the next.

You can easily portray people with disabilities positively by using neutral language and emphasizing their abilities, not their limitations. Put people first, not their disability. For example, write *woman with arthritis*, *children who are deaf*, or *people with disabilities*. This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation.

What are the preferred terms that put people first?

The following list offers examples of negative, inappropriate, or outdated words and expressions that you should replace with positive, acceptable, or preferred use. In general, put people first—focus on the person, not the disability. For more descriptors and detailed explanations, please check out the resources listed at the end of this paper.

Replace	With	So that you will
Handicapped accessible	Accessible by people with disabilities, fully accessible	use a preferred term in place of an outdated one.
The disabled, the crippled, the handicapped a cripple or invalid	Persons or people with disabilities; disabled persons or people	put people first and avoid generalizing people as if they belonged to a disability community.

Replace	With	So that you will
Normal (when used as the opposite of disabled), whole, able-bodied, temporarily able-bodied, or healthy	non-disabled person or nondisabled	use a neutral, appropriate term instead of implying that someone with a disability is abnormal.
Challenged physically inconvenienced handi-capable mentally different	[the specific disability]	avoid euphemisms. Disability groups consider these terms condescending because they reinforce the idea that disabilities cannot be dealt with directly and candidly.
Birth defect	disabled since birth or born with ... (name of disability) congenital disability	eliminate any sense of a defective or broken person and shift the description to what a person <i>has</i> rather than what a person <i>is</i> .
The blind or the visually impaired (as a collective noun) Blind person	persons who are visually impaired or blind, persons with visual impairment, blind persons, girl with low vision, boy who is visually impaired, woman who is legally blind, man who has low vision	use the correct generic or specific term for a condition in which a person has loss of vision for ordinary life purposes. (Some people prefer the generic term visually impaired to refer to all degrees of vision loss.)
Confined, bound, restricted to or dependent on a wheelchair	wheelchair user or person who uses a wheelchair	emphasize abilities, not limitations.
Crippled by, afflicted with, suffering from, victim of, deformed	person who has, or person with ... (name of disability), person living with [health condition such as AIDS]	not sensationalize a disability. Replace the pity or tragedy implied with respect for the person.
Person who has overcome his disability Woman who is courageous in spite of [disability]	person who is successful, productive	avoid portraying an ordinary person as a hero when you imply the person has courage because of having a disability.

Replace	With	So that you will
Defective, maimed	impaired, injured	avoid implying that a person is defective or broken.
Crazy, mental patient, emotionally disturbed, mental, insane, mad, deranged, deviant, the mentally ill	<p>Person who has a emotional disability, woman who has a mental illness, man with a psychiatric disability</p> <p><i>General terms:</i> a disability, a medical condition, an illness</p> <p><i>Vague but more specific terms:</i> a biochemical imbalance, a neurological problem, a brain disorder, difficulty with stress</p>	<p>use a more positive general or an accurate, specific term to break stereotypes and help remove the stigma and misunderstanding associated with mental illnesses.</p> <p>The person with the disability should decide how specific to be in describing the psychiatric disability.</p> <p><i>A specific reference to mental illness:</i> a mental illness, psychiatric disorder, mental disability. Could use the exact diagnosis: schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, anxiety disorder.</p>
Deaf and dumb, deaf mute	<p>Deaf person, person who is hard of hearing, hearing-impaired person, individuals with hearing losses, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, boy who is hard of hearing</p> <p>person with a speech impairment, person who is unable to speak, man who uses synthetic speech</p>	<p>avoid inaccurate terms, remove negative stereotypes, and focus on people first.</p> <p>[Some individuals completely disfavor the term hearing impaired; others prefer to use deaf or hard of hearing to indicate any degree of hearing loss-from mild to profound.]</p>
Elephant man's disease	person who has neurofibromatosis	put the person first.
Epileptic, Fits	person who has epilepsy or seizures	put the person first.

Replace	With	So that you will
Gimp	person with an amputated ... (name of limb that is amputated)	put the person first.
Handicapped (person)	person with a disability	avoid applying a term to people that describes situations or conditions.
Lame	person who is mobility-impaired or person with a mobility impairment	put the person first.
Midget, dwarf	person of small (or short) stature or short-statured person Some groups prefer the term "little people."	use the preferred term. Small/short stature describes people under 4'10" tall. Dwarfism is an accepted medical term, but it should not be used as general terminology.
Paralytic or arthritic	person who is paralyzed or has arthritis	put the person first.
The retarded, mentally retarded, mentally subnormal, Mongoloid, Mongol, Downs child/person	person with an intellectual disability, girl with a developmental disability, woman with a learning disability, boy with a cognitive disability, child with [or who has] Down syndrome, people with mental retardation	Avoid unacceptable terms, break stereotypes, and help remove the stigma and misunderstanding historically associated with intellectual, cognitive, and developmental disabilities.
Spastic (noun) CP victim	Person with cerebral palsy	put the person first and avoid invoking image of tragedy.
Special needs, problem with [walking]	Person who wears glasses, she needs [or uses] a wheelchair	encourage respect for the person and avoid portraying that person's need as a problem.

Sources Cited

“Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities”
The Life Span Institute, University of Kansas
www.lsi.ku.edu/lsi/internal/guidelines.html

Teaches appropriate terminology by offering concise definitions and the preferred terms for referring to disabilities (drawn from over 100 disability organizations). Provides link to order an 18” x 24” poster of disability writing style do’s and don’ts (\$15) developed by the Research and Training Center on Independent Living (<http://rtcil.org/>)

McConnell, Kim. (Jan. 2003). “Writing About People with Disabilities.”
Achieve! Newsletter
www.stcsig.org/sn/newsletter.shtml

McGowen, Michele. (2001). “Tips for Improving Communication With and About People with Disabilities.” *Information and Referral, the Journal of the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems*, pp. 85-99.

“Using the Correct Terminology,” Asian-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons
www.unescap.org/decade/terminology.htm

This organization asserts that “the Asian and Pacific region has by far the largest number of people with disabilities in the world.” Don’t miss the gentle, enlightening parody that explains the etiquette of “Meeting with Sighted People.” Topics include what to do when you meet a sighted person and how do sighted people get around.

Snow, Kathie. Author of *People First Language* and *Disability is Natural*.
www.disabilityisnatural.com/pdf/PFL.pdf

Other Useful Resources

The STC Special Needs SIG home page
www.stcsig.org/sn/

Kathie Snow tells us, “And no more ‘special needs’! A person’s needs aren’t special to him—they’re normal and ordinary! Keep thinking—there are many descriptors we need to change. Practice new ways of thinking!” We have followed Kathie’s charge: as of 20 May 2003, the STC Special Needs SIG changed its name to the AccessAbility SIG.

“The Ten Commandments of Communicating With People With Disabilities”
by the Production Development Associates
www.pdassoc.com/xcommand.htm