

People-First Language Tip Sheet

Think “People First”

Language is a reflection of how people see each other. That’s why the words we use can hurt. It’s also why responsible communicators are now choosing language that reflects the dignity of people with disabilities—words that put the person first, rather than the disability. Read on for some short tips on using language that empowers.

- Think “people first.” Say “a woman who has mental retardation,” rather than “a mentally retarded woman.”
- Avoid words like “unfortunate,” “afflicted” and “victim.” Also, try to avoid casting a person with a disability as a superhuman model of courage. People with disabilities are just people, not tragic figures or demigods.
- A developmental disability is not a disease. Do not mention “symptoms,” “patients” or “treatment,” unless the person you’re writing about has an illness as well as a disability.
- Use common sense. Avoid terms with obvious negative or judgmental connotations, such as “crippled,” “deaf and dumb,” “lame” and “defective.” If you aren’t sure how to refer to a person’s condition, ask. And, if the disability is not relevant to your story or conversation, why mention it at all?
- Never refer to a person as “confined to a wheelchair.” Wheelchairs enable people to escape confinement. A person with a mobility impairment “uses” a wheelchair.
- Try to describe people without disabilities as “typical” rather than “normal.”