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Information, Guidance and Training on the
Americans with Disabilities Act

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Guidelines for Writing about People with Disabilities

Words are powerful.

The words you use and the way you portray individuals with disabilities matters. This factsheet provides guidelines for portraying individuals with disabilities in a respectful and balanced way by using language that is accurate, neutral and objective.

1. Ask to find out if an individual is willing to disclose their disability.

Do not assume that people with disabilities are willing to disclose their disability. While some people prefer to be public about their disability such as including information about their disability in a media article, others choose to not be publically identified as a person with a disability.

2. Emphasize abilities, not limitations.

Choosing language that emphasizes what people can do instead of what they can't do is empowering.

Use	Don't Use
Person who uses a wheelchair	*Wheelchair-bound; confined to a wheelchair*
Person who uses a communication device; uses an alternative method of communication	*Is non-verbal; can't talk*

3. In general, refer to the person first and the disability second.

People with disabilities are, first and foremost, people. Labeling a person equates the person with a condition and can be disrespectful and dehumanizing. A person isn't a disability, condition or diagnosis; a person *has* a disability, condition or diagnosis. This is called Person-First Language.

Use	Don't Use
Person with a disability, people with disabilities	*Disabled person; the disabled*
Man with paraplegia	*Paraplegic; paraplegic man*
Person with a learning disability	*Slow learner*
Student receiving special education services	*Special education student*
A person of short stature or little person	*Dwarf, midget*

4. However, always ask to find out an individual's language preferences.

People with disabilities have different preferences when referring to their disability. Some people see their disability as an essential part of who they are and prefer to be identified with their disability first – this is called Identity-First Language. Others prefer Person-First Language. Examples of Identity-First Language include identifying someone as a *deaf person* instead of a *person who is deaf*, or an *autistic person* instead of a *person with autism*.

5. Use neutral language.

Do not use language that portrays the person as passive or suggests a lack of something: *victim*, *invalid*, *defective.*

Use	Don't Use
Person who has had a stroke	*Stroke victim*
Congenital disability	*Birth defect*
Person with epilepsy	*Person afflicted with epilepsy, epileptic*
Person with a brain injury	*Brain damaged, brain injury sufferer*
Burn survivor	*Burn victim*

6. Use language that emphasizes the need for accessibility rather than the presence of a disability.

Use	Don't Use
Accessible parking	*Handicapped parking*
Accessible restroom	*Disabled restroom*

Note that 'handicapped' is an outdated and unacceptable term to use when referring to individuals or accessible environments.

7. Do not use condescending euphemisms.

Terms like *differently-abled*, *challenged*, *handi-capable* or *special* are often considered condescending.

8. Do not use offensive language.

Examples of offensive language include *freak, retard, lame, imbecile, vegetable, cripple, crazy, or psycho.*

9. Describing people without disabilities.

In discussions that include people both with and without disabilities, do not use words that imply negative stereotypes of those with disabilities.

Use	Don't Use
People without disabilities	*Normal, healthy, able-bodied, whole*
She is a child without disabilities	*She is a normal child*

10. Remember that disability is not an illness and people with disabilities are not patients.

People with disabilities can be healthy, although they may have a chronic condition such as arthritis or diabetes. Only refer to someone as a patient when his or her relationship with a health care provider is under discussion.

11. Do not use language that perpetuates negative stereotypes about psychiatric disabilities.

Much work needs to be done to break down stigma around psychiatric disabilities. The American Psychiatric Association has new guidelines for communicating responsibly about mental health.

Use	Don't Use
He has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder; he is living with bipolar disorder	*He is (a) bipolar; he is (a) manic-depressive*
Attempted suicide	*Unsuccessful suicide*
Died by suicide	*Committed suicide*
Is receiving mental health services	*Mental Health patient/case*
Person with schizophrenia	*Schizophrenic, schizo*
Person with substance use disorder; person experiencing alcohol/drug problem	*Addict, abuser; junkie*
She has a mental health condition or psychiatric disability	*She is mentally ill/emotionally disturbed/ insane*

12. Portray successful people with disabilities in a balanced way, not as heroic or superhuman.

Do not make assumptions by saying a person with a disability is heroic or inspiring because they are simply living their lives. Stereotypes may raise false expectations that everyone with a disability is or should be an inspiration. People may be inspired by them just as they may be inspired by anyone else. Everyone faces challenges in life.

13. Do not mention someone's disability unless it is essential to the story.

The fact that someone is blind or uses a wheelchair may or may not be relevant to the article you are writing. Only identify a person as having a disability if this information is essential to the story. For example, say "Board president Chris Jones called the meeting to order." Do not say, "Board president Chris Jones, who is blind, called the meeting to order." It's ok to identify someone's disability if it is essential to the story. For example, "Amy Jones, who uses a wheelchair, spoke about her experience with using accessible transportation."

14. Create balanced human interest stories instead of tear-jerking stories.

Tear-jerkers about incurable diseases, congenital disabilities or severe injury that are intended to elicit pity perpetuate negative stereotypes.

Resources

Let's Put the Person First, Not the Disability, Kathie Snow, 2013
http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/explore/people-first-language

Guidelines: How to Write and Report About People with Disabilities, and "Your Words, Our Image" (poster), Research & Training Center on Independent Living, University of Kansas, 8th Edition, 2013.
http://www.rtcil.org/products/Portrayal&MediaIssues.shtml

Mental Health Terminology: Words Matter and "Associated Press Style Book on Mental Illness," American Psychiatric Association, 2013. http://www.psychiatry.org/advocacy--newsroom/newsroom/reporting-on-mental-illness

Provided By:
Pacific ADA Center
1-800-949-4232 (Voice/TTY)
(510) 285-5600 (Voice/TTY)
adatech@adapacific.org
www.adapacific.org