

Inclusive Language Guide



Whilst much progress has been made in many aspects of law and life, people with disabilities are still left to fight for their rights in many situations.

Our prevailing attitudes are centered around a medical model of disability. This model says differences should be fixed or changed by medical and other treatments. If we adopted a social model of disability, we would instead organise society to remove barriers that restrict life choices for people with disability. For example, every building, street, or public transport would routinely be accessible to a person with any type of disability.

Language is a powerful way to positively influence societies attitudes to disability, which is why the principles below are important.



Principles

- A fundamental principle is to put the person before their disability. They may be a parent, lawyer, musician, sportsperson as opposed to a paraplegic or cerebral palsy sufferer.
- Avoid labels that group people separately to the rest of society such as "the disabled" or "the disadvantaged". Conversely we don't speak about people with a disability as victims or objects of pity.
- Portray people by focussing on what they can do or be as opposed to what they cannot.
- Language that implies a person with a disability is inspirational simply because they have a disability is inappropriate.
- Phrases that can be considered patronising are "differently abled", "people of all abilities", "special needs".
- If you do not know what to say, just ask how a person likes to be described.

Content warning: On the flip side of this page, this guide contains language that is ableist and offensive. The following language should not be used and is for educational purposes only.



Inclusive Language Guide

Referring to people with:

- cognitive disability
- intellectual disability
- learning disability

Avoid language such as:

- intellectually challenged
- mentally defective
- mentally retarded
- mentally disabled
- simple
- special
- slow
- slow learner
- special needs

Say: John has an intellectual disability

Not: John is intellectually disabled

Referring to people with:

- a mental health condition
- psychosocial disability

Avoid language such as:

- crazy
- insane/insanity
- mad
- manic/maniac
- mental
- mental case
- mentally defective
- mentally unstable
- psycho(tic)
- psychopath(ic)

For example: Jane has a mental health condition

Not: Jane is mentally unstable

Referring to people with:

- disability (women with disability, children with disability, etc)
- a chronic health condition

Avoid language such as:

- afflicted by _____
- crippled by _____
- differently abled
- handicap(ped)
- specially abled
- special needs
- suffers from _____
- the disabled
- with different abilities

For example: John has a disability

Not: John is differently abled

Refer to people with:

- a brain injury
- an acquired brain injury (ABI)

Avoid language such as:

- brain-damaged
- brain-impaired

Refer to people with:

- short stature

Avoid language such as:

- dwarf
- midget

Refer to people who:

- use a wheelchair

Avoid language such as:

- confined to a wheelchair
- wheelchair-bound

Refer to people as:

- blind (if they identify that way)
- deaf (if they identify that way)
- hard of hearing (sometimes stylised as HoH)
- a person with a hearing impairment
- a person with a visual impairment

Avoid language such as:

- blind as a bat
- deaf and dumb
- mute

Refer to people as:

- an autistic person*
- a person with autism
- a person on the autism spectrum

Avoid language such as:

- aspy/aspie
- autistic*
- high-functioning autism
- profoundly autistic

**Some people with autism identify as autistic people, or do not find the term 'autistic' offensive, because they consider autism an identity beyond the medical diagnosis.*

Refer to people as having:

- paraplegia
- quadriplegia

Avoid language such as:

- paraplegic
- quadriplegic