

## **A Guide Addressing Inclusive Language for Ableism**

The words we use to describe individuals with disabilities matters. We don't always realize how our speech reflects an unconscious bias against people living with disabilities or mental health conditions. Although there is no monolithic language style preference shared across all the people who have a disability, it remains important to use respectful and inclusive language when communicating with or talking about ability.

### **1. Words are powerful.**

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

### **2. Do not mention someone's disability unless it is essential to the story.**

- 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 using accessible transportation."

### **3. Learn about the two major linguistic preferences to address disability.**

- 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*.

### **4. Avoid offensive language – even as a joke.**

- Examples of offensive terms: mad, freak, psycho, retard, lame, imbecile, crazy. Don't call someone "a retard" or "retarded" if they do something silly, unwise, thoughtless, shortsighted, dangerous, ill-advised, frustrating, etc. Other examples include asking someone jokingly, "Are you deaf/blind?" "Can't you see/hear?"

The terms used for people with disabilities all too frequently perpetuate stereotypes and false ideas. Conscious thought about what we say, and when we say it, may help to more positively reshape how we communicate about disability in society.

<b>Use</b>	<b>Don't Use</b>
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
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
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
Accessible parking	Handicapped parking
Accessible restroom	Disabled restroom

People without disabilities	Normal, healthy, able-bodied, whole
She is a child without disabilities	She is a normal child
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

Resources:

*Guidelines for writing about people with disabilities* | *ada national network*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 3, 2020, from <https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing>

*Guidelines: How to Write and Report About People with Disabilities*, and "Your Words, Our Image Research & Training Center on Independent Living, University of Kansas, 8th Edition, 2013.

*Mental Health Terminology: Words Matter* and "Associated Press Style Book on Mental Illness" American Psychiatric Association, 2013.