



Guidance for Writing and Speaking About People with Disabilities and Older Adults

July 2014

When describing a person with a disability, refer to the person first and not the disability. This approach emphasizes the person first and not the disability. Below is a guide for writing and speaking about people with disabilities and older adults.

- Using the word “disability” is preferable. Terms such as “handicapped,” “crippled,” or “retarded” are outdated and inappropriate.
- When referring to a writer who is blind, use a “writer who is blind” and not a “blind writer.” This guidance carries over to other disabilities.
- Try to avoid euphemisms such as “physically challenged” or “handi-capable.” The person is a *person with a disability*.
- When referring to tours, use “tours that are accessible to all, including people with and without disabilities,” and not “special tours.”
- Terms like “stricken,” “afflicted,” and “victim” have negative connotations. Instead, use “person with AIDS” instead of “an AIDS victim.”
- When referring to a person without a disability, the term “person without a disability” is preferred. Try to stay away from terms such as “normal.”
- The term “older persons” is preferable to “the elderly.”

Some things to Remember:

- Disability is not special, but ordinary and affects most of us at some point in our lives.
- Thinking about flexible ways to provide access to facilities, programs and activities is a good way of serving the public.

- People with disabilities *live* with their disabilities every day. They do not *overcome* them.
- Disability is not static but changes all the time. One example might be a person in remission from cancer.
- People with disabilities are neither saints nor sinners – they do not want to be portrayed as courageous or tortured, but rather as individuals who find alternative means to accomplish everyday activities.
- People with disabilities do not have special needs, but do require certain accommodations to make the best use of an organization’s facilities and programs.

The following table provides guidance when referring to people with disabilities.

<i>Affirmative</i>		<i>Negative</i>	
✓ ✓	People with disabilities A disability	∅ ∅ ∅ ∅	The handicapped The impaired The disabled The unfortunate
✓ ✓	Person without disabilities Non-disabled person	∅ ∅	Able-bodied Normal person <i>This implies that a person with a disability is not normal.</i>
✓ ✓	Person who is blind Person who is partially sighted or has low vision	∅ ∅	The blind The sightless
✓ ✓	Person who is deaf Person with hearing or speech disabilities	∅	The deaf or deaf mute
✓	Person who is hard-of-hearing	∅	Suffers a hearing loss <i>“Suffers” dramatizes a disability</i>
✓ ✓	Person who uses a wheelchair Person with limited mobility	∅ ∅ ∅ ∅	Wheelchair-bound Confined or restricted to a wheelchair Cripple The lame <i>People use wheelchairs for mobility and freedom.</i>
✓ ✓	Person who does not speak Non-Verbal	∅ ∅	Dumb Mute

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Person with learning disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø The learning disabled Ø Dyslexic (as a generic) Ø The retarded
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Older person ✓ Older adult ✓ Mature adult 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø The aged Ø The elderly Ø Senior citizen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Person of short stature ✓ Little people ✓ Dwarf 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø Diminutive person Ø Midget
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Person who lives in a nursing home or long-term care institution ✓ Person who stays at home because of limited mobility, fragile health, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø The infirmed Ø The institutionalized Ø The homebound
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Successful ✓ Productive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø Courageous, inspiring <i>This implies a person is a hero or martyr.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Person with intellectual disabilities ✓ Person with cognitive disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø The retarded Ø The mentally deficient Ø Special needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Person with mental illness ✓ Person with a psychiatric disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø Schizophrenic (as a generic) Ø Emotionally disturbed Ø The insane
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Person with burns or burn survivor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø Burn victim
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Persons surviving bombing or bomb survivors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø Bomb victims