



Delaware County Board of
Developmental Disabilities



People First Language Style Guide

A reference for media professionals and the public



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What is People First Language?

People First Language (also referred to as “People First”) is an accurate way of referring to a person with a disability. This style guide offers an alphabetical list of standard terms that focus on the person instead of the disability. It is not a complete list but a general representation of terms people with disabilities commonly find respectable.

Why People First Language?

Words matter! The words we use to describe people have a significant impact on the way we perceive people and our attitudes towards them. By using People First Language we focus on the person first, not their disability. People are unique and their abilities or disabilities are simply part of who they are, not what defines them. Using People First Language is a great way to remove barriers and encourage mutual respect. The most important thing to remember is people are people, no matter their abilities. The best way to be person-centered is to refer to the person with the disability the same way you would refer to yourself, a family member or friend.

Tips for Using People First Language

- Avoid using terms or descriptions that suggest pity (i.e. “suffers from”). When you use terms like this it assumes the person with a disability is living a reduced quality of life.
- Keep in mind that some disability groups have a variety of reasons for disliking certain phrases. When talking to or writing about someone with a disability, it is always good to ask the person which words or phrases are acceptable to them.
- Focus on people’s abilities rather than their disabilities. Emphasize what they can do or like to do, not what they can’t do.
- It is okay to talk about someone’s disability or describe the impact it has had on their life. When doing so, just be sure to focus on the person first and always refer to their disability respectfully and accurately.

For more information or questions, contact:

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Quick Reference

PREFERRED

NOT PREFERRED

She has autism.....	Autistic girl
Congenital disability.....	Birth defect
He is blind/visually impaired.....	Blind person
Person served/supported.....	Client/Consumer
She is deaf/hard of hearing.....	Deaf person
He has a disability (be specific if possible).....	Disabled, retard, handicapped, etc.
She has Down syndrome.....	Downs child, mongoloid
He has epilepsy.....	Epileptic
Accessible parking.....	Handicap parking
Little person/dwarf..... (Ask the person his/her preference)	Midget
She doesn't speak/uses nonverbal communication.....	Mute/dumb
Uses a wheelchair.....	Wheelchair-bound

A

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Involves learning and behavioral challenges that do not have any serious underlying physical or mental causes. It is characterized by difficulty in sustaining attention, impulsive behavior and excessive activity.

Preferred Use: *child with ADHD*

Not Preferred: *hyperactive*

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

A developmental disability originating in infancy. Autism and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development characterized by difficulties in social interaction, language dysfunction and repetitive behaviors.

Preferred Use: *child with autism, she has autism, “on the spectrum”*

Not Preferred: *autistic child*

B

Blind.

Describes a person with a complete loss of sight. For others, use terms such as visually impaired or person with low vision.

Preferred Use: *person with visual impairments, boy who is blind*

Not Preferred: *the blind, blind person*

Brain Injury.

A temporary or long-term disruption in brain function resulting from injury to the brain. Difficulties with cognitive, physical, emotional and/or social functioning may occur.

Preferred Use: *person who has a brain injury, woman who sustained a brain injury, boy with an acquired brain injury*

Not Preferred: *brain damaged, suffers from brain damage*

C

Cerebral palsy (CP).

Refers to a number of neurological disorders that appear at birth, in infancy or early childhood and permanently affect body movement and muscle coordination, but don't worsen over time.

Preferred Use: *a person with cerebral palsy, he/she has cerebral palsy*

Not Preferred: *Cerebral palsy victim, cerebral palsied, spastic, a CP*

Congenital disability.

A disability present since birth.

Preferred Use: *has a congenital disability, was born with a disability, has had a disability since birth*

Not Preferred: *birth defect, defective*

D

Deaf.

Describes a person with a profound or complete hearing loss. Language often develops differently from those who have hearing. Many people who are hearing impaired have mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. There is no uniform terminology so it is best to ask the person which term is suitable.

Preferred Use: *hearing impaired, woman who is deaf, boy who is hard of hearing, partially deaf*

Not Preferred: *deaf and dumb, deaf mute*

Developmental disabilities.

An intellectual or physical disability that occurs at birth or before age 22, is expected to be life-long and affects one or more major life activities. It is an umbrella term.

Preferred Use: *an individual with: a disability, autism, epilepsy, a brain injury, etc.*

Not Preferred: *retarded, disabled, handicapped, autistic, epileptic, brain damaged*

Down Syndrome.

Describes a chromosomal irregularity that results in a delay in physical, intellectual, and language development.

Preferred Use: *a person with Down syndrome*

Not Preferred: *Mongol, Mongoloid, Down's baby*

E

Epilepsy.

Describes a chronic neurological and developmental disorder characterized by “recurrent, unprovoked seizures,” according to the Epilepsy Foundation.

Preferred Use: *he/she has epilepsy*

Not Preferred: *he's an epileptic*

H

Handicap.

The term handicap should not be used when describing a disability. The term is widely used when citing laws and regulations, parking, places, although many prefer the term accessible.

Preferred Use: *she has a disability*

Not Preferred: *she's handicapped*

L

Learning disability.

Anything that permanently affects how a person processes, retains and expresses information.

Preferred Use: *a child with a learning disability*

Not Preferred: *slow, slow learner, retarded*

Little person/little people.

Refers to people of short stature, below 4 feet 10 inches. Groups focusing on this issue are often divided between using “little person” or “dwarf,” as some people are offended by those terms and others are not.

Preferred Use: *ask the person who is being written or talked about*

Not Preferred: *midget, vertically challenged*

M

Mental illness/mental disorder.

An umbrella term for different conditions that affect how individuals act, think, feel or perceive the world. Specific disorders are types of mental illness and should be used whenever possible. Do not describe an individual as mentally ill unless it is clearly pertinent to a story and the diagnosis is properly sourced.

Preferred Use: *She has depression, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia*

Not Preferred: *insane, crazy, nuts, deranged, lunatic*

Mental retardation.

The terms mentally retarded, retard, and mental retardation were once common terms that are now considered outdated and offensive. In 2010, President Barack Obama signed a measure known as “Rosa’s Law” that replaced the term mental retardation with intellectual disability in many areas of government, including federal law.

Preferred Use: *Always try to be specific, she has a developmental disability*

Not Preferred: *Retarded, mentally disabled person*

Mongoloid.

This term was used to describe people with Down syndrome. This is considered a highly offensive term and is no longer acceptable to use.

Preferred Use: *a person with Down syndrome*

Not Preferred: *Mongol, Mongoloid, Down’s baby*

Mute.

Typically considered a derogatory term referring to a person who physically cannot speak because it implies people who do not use speech are unable to express themselves. A person who does not speak may be able to hear and they may use written language or sign language.

Preferred Use: *a person who uses assistive communication, she uses sign language*

Not Preferred: *mute, dumb*

S

Seizure.

An involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness resulting from something neurological like epilepsy or brain injury.

Preferred Use: *person with a seizure disorder, person who had a seizure*

Not Preferred: *spastic, epileptic*

Spinal cord injury.

Occurs when there has been permanent damage to the spinal cord. Quadriplegia is a substantial or significant loss of function in all four extremities. Paraplegia refers to substantial or significant loss of function in only the lower part of the body.

Preferred Use: *person with a spinal cord injury, person who has quadriplegia or paraplegia*

Not Preferred: *Quadriplegic, paraplegic*

W

Wheelchair/wheelchair-bound.

People use wheelchairs for independent mobility and the equipment is considered part of their personal space. People who use wheelchairs have widely different disabilities and varying abilities.

Preferred Use: *person who uses a wheelchair*

Not Preferred: *wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair*

This style guide, updated in December 2017, is produced by the Delaware County Board of Developmental Disabilities. The Associated Press Stylebook, National Center on Disability and Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, and Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services' Person First Style Guide are the sources for the content of this media guide.