



Disability Terminology: Choosing the Right Words When Talking About Disability

When speaking to or about someone with a disability, it's important to make note of which terms are offensive, outdated, and inappropriate. Throughout this page, we'll unpack why certain terms are used and take a deeper look inside the debate on disability terminology.

Different Schools of Thought

Person-first language

Many institutions, including [The American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#), promote what is referred to as “person-first language” when it comes to talking about people with disabilities (1). Person-first language puts the person before the disability, using phrases like “person with a disability” or “person with autism” instead of “disabled person” or “autistic person.” Advocates of this approach state that it focuses on the person who is affected by the condition instead of the condition itself; the first words you hear refer to the person as opposed to the disability that person has.

Identity-first language

Other institutions, like [The National Federation of the Blind](#), use identity-first language when speaking of disabilities. This means they use phrases like “diabetic person” or “disabled person” as opposed to “person with diabetes” or “person with a disability.” They use these identifiers because they feel it helps those people to “claim” their disabilities with pride. People who refer to themselves using identity-first terms may do so because they feel they are celebrating or owning their disability instead of distancing themselves from their disability by adding on the phrase “with a disability.”

What's the difference between identity-first and person-first language?

According to JR Thorpe, in a piece for [Bustle](#), “the difference between the perspectives essentially boils down to personhood and disability: is it something that you *have*, or something that's at the core of your identity?” (2). If you feel your disability isn't as important as who you are as a person, you may wish to be spoken to in person-first language. If you feel your disability is an integral part of who you are, you may want someone to use identity-



first language.

If you regularly interact with a person in the disability community, it may be a good idea to inquire about their preference and use that going forward. This way you can better communicate with them. Both approaches respect disabled people, so either choice will typically work when talking or writing about disabilities.

Agreements in terminology

Both schools of thought agree on a few general guidelines for terminology when referring to disabilities:

Avoid pejorative language

Across the board, people with disabilities generally agree that words implying the person is a victim of their disability should be avoided. For example, it is recommended that people choose phrases like “they had a stroke” instead of “they are a stroke victim” or “they suffered a stroke.” These negative phrases can imply that the person is passive to their condition.

Know when praise is patronizing

Excessively praising a person with a disability can be insulting because it implies that you have low expectations of them. For example, calling someone a “hero” or an “inspiration,” though it may seem complimentary, can sound condescending to a person who is simply trying to live their life just like anybody else. Of course, praise is still warranted for remarkable accomplishments, just as it would be for a person without disabilities. However, it may be inappropriate to praise someone for, say, navigating public transportation in a wheelchair. Yes, it is a challenge, but it may also be part of their daily life and something they are accustomed to. According to Erin Tatum, in her piece for [Everyday Feminism](#), “If people fixate on how inhibited they think disabled people are, the emphasis shifts to our obstacles



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rather than our achievements” (3).

What can you say instead of offering praise? Catherine Soper suggests in a helpful piece for [The Mighty](#): “When you meet someone with a disability, connect with them as a human. Give them credit where it’s due, but don’t reduce them to an object of inspiration that is constantly overcoming simply by living their daily life” (4).

Disability terminology in practice

Here is how these terms work in practice, according to [The National Disability Authority](#) and [The National Center on Disability and Journalism](#):

Person-First	Identity-First	Not Recommended
person with a disability	disabled person	the disabled, cripple, victim, spastic, spaz, handicapped, the handicapped, abnormal, dumb/deaf-mute, defect, defective, midget, or vegetable
person with an intellectual disability	intellectually-disabled person	mental handicap, mentally retarded, or mentally handicapped
person with a mental health disability	mentally-disabled person	mad, crazy, schizo, schizophrenic, insane, nuts, psycho, psychotic, demented, senile, loony, or lunatic
person who uses a wheelchair	wheelchair user	wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair
has... (diagnosis)	adjective form of diagnosis (i.e. 'autistic') person	suffers from... afflicted with... stricken with... or victim of...
person without a disability	not disabled or non-disabled	normal



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DISABILITY TERMINOLOGY

Etiquette & Guidelines

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Different Schools of Thought

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

Puts the person before the disability, using phrases like "person with a disability" or "person with autism" instead of "disabled person" or "autistic person."

This approach focuses on the person who is affected by the condition instead of the condition itself; the first words you hear refer to the person as opposed to the disability that person has.

IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

Uses phrases like "diabetic person" or "disabled person" as opposed to "person with diabetes" or "person with a disability."

Proponents feel these identifiers help people "claim" their disabilities with pride. Identity-first terms may do so because they feel they are celebrating or owning their disability instead of distancing themselves from their disability by adding on the phrase "with a disability."



What's the Difference?

"The difference between the perspectives essentially boils down to personhood and disability: is it something that you have, or something that's at the core of your identity?"

-JR Thorpe, for Bustle

Disability Terminology in Practice

PERSON-FIRST	IDENTITY-FIRST	OFFENSIVE & NOT RECOMMENDED
Person with a disability	Disabled person	Disabled, the disabled, cripple, victim, spastic, spaz, handicapped, the handicapped, abnormal, dumb/deaf-mute, defect, defective, midget, paraplegic, quadriplegic, or vegetable
Person with an intellectual disability	Intellectually disabled person	Mental handicap, mentally retarded, or mentally handicapped
Person with a mental health disability	Mentally disabled person	Mad, crazy, schizo, schizophrenic, insane, nuts, psycho, psychotic, demented, senile, loony, or lunatic
Person who uses a wheelchair	Wheelchair-user	Wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair
Has...(diagnosis)	Adjective form of diagnosis (i.e. 'autistic') person	Suffers from... afflicted with... stricken with... victim of...
Person without a disability	Not disabled or non-disabled	Normal

Info from The National Disability Authority and The National Center on Disability and Journalism

Sources: <http://www.nad.gov.uk/disability-terminology-words-2018>
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<https://www.fox.com/2018/04/26/disability-terminology-words-2018/>
<http://doh.ny.gov/2018/04/26/disability-terminology-words-2018/>

H.I.E. Help Center





Related Resources:

- [Interacting with people with disabilities: Etiquette tips and guidelines](#)

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