

The Missing Page in your Stylebook: People-First Language



A service of the Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council
and SAIL Coalition (Self Advocates In Leadership)

People-first language uses words that reflect awareness, dignity and a positive attitude about people with disabilities. Emphasis is placed on the person first, rather than the disability. Example: “John is a writer who has a disability,” rather than “John is a disabled writer.” By using people-first language, we gently create awareness that the focus/subject is the person, thereby demonstrating respect toward that person.

People-first language should be used by reporters, headline writers and editors as they produce copy, headlines and photo captions.

What is the distinction between a disability and a handicap?*

Disability – A disability is a condition caused by an accident, trauma, genetics or disease, which may limit a person’s mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function. Some people have more than one disability.

Handicap – A handicap is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person, regardless of whether that person has a disability. Webster’s defines handicap as “to put at a disadvantage.” Example: Some people with disabilities use wheelchairs. Stairs, narrow doorways and curbs are handicaps imposed upon people who use wheelchairs.

Tips for Reporting on People with Disabilities**

- Do not focus on disability unless it is crucial to a story. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life of those same individuals, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities, or discrimination.
- Do not portray successful people with disabilities as superhuman. This raises false expectations that all people with disabilities should be high achievers.
- Do not sensationalize a disability by using such language as afflicted with, crippled, suffers from, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound, etc.
- Do not use generic labels for disability groups such as “the retarded” or “the deaf.”
- Do not define individuals by their disability. Put people first, not their disability.
- Emphasize abilities, not limitations. Show people as active participants in society.
- Do not use euphemisms to describe a disability.

People-First Language Preferred Expressions***

Say/Write...	Instead of...
Child with a disability	disabled, invalid or handicapped child
Individual with cerebral palsy	palsied, CP or spastic
Person who has....	Afflicted, suffers from, victim of
Nonverbal (with speech)	mute or dumb
Child(ren) with autism	autistic
Developmental delay	slow or retarded
Emotional disorder/mental illness	crazy or insane
Deaf or has a hearing impairment	deaf and dumb
Communicates with sign language	signer
Uses a wheelchair	confined to a wheelchair
Has a cognitive disability	retarded
He has epilepsy	epileptic
Adult with Down syndrome	mongoloid, suffers from Down syndrome
Has a learning disability	is learning disabled
Has a physical disability	is physically disabled/crippled
Non-disabled	normal, healthy
Congenital disability	birth defect
Condition	disease (unless it is indeed defined as a disease)
Seizures	fits
Cleft lip	hare lip
Has mobility impairment	lame or crippled
Paralyzed	invalid or paralytic
Has quadriplegia	quadriplegic
Has paraplegia	paraplegic

Thank you for your consideration, and for serving as our partner in progress, as we foster true inclusion and diversity. You will make a world of difference for people by using respectful people-first language and encouraging others to do the same.

Resources for Information about Developmental Disabilities:

Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council
800-634-4473 • www.ddc.wa.gov

Informing Families, Building Trust
www.informingfamilies.org

The Arc of Washington State
888-754-8798 or 360-357-5596 • www.arcwa.org

SAIL Coalition (Self Advocates In Leadership)
888-754-8798 • www.sailcoalition.org

Contributing Sources: * Disability Handbook, City of San Antonio, Texas, ** University of Kansas Publications, Research and Training Center on Independent Living, *** The Pacesetter newsletter, Girl Scout Council of Greater Minn., The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities for the State of Georgia

Additional resources and the latest information are just a click away.

www.ddc.wa.gov/press