

A Disability Language Guide

Language is always evolving. The examples given in this handout reflect a brief sketch of current best practices. They can and are likely to change. See something you think needs updating? Let us know!

Language is an individual choice. Just because one person prefers People First language does not mean that someone else who has the same disability will not prefer Identity First. Your best option is to ask.

People First language is meant to emphasize the personhood of individuals with disabilities. It emphasizes each person's value, individuality, dignity, and capabilities before disability.

DO NOT say	DO Say (if People First is preferred)
The handicapped, the differently-abled, special needs	People with disabilities
Normal, healthy people	People without disabilities
Veena is a quadriplegic. Veena is crippled.	Veena has a physical disability.
Mindy is mentally retarded. Mindy is slow.	Mindy is a child with an intellectual disability. Mindy has a developmental disability.
Tia is wheelchair-bound. Tia is confined to a wheelchair.	Tia uses a wheelchair.
Stevie suffers from cerebral palsy. Stevie is a victim of cerebral palsy.	Stevie has cerebral palsy.
She is mute.	She is nonverbal.
Juliette was hearing impaired.	Juliette was hard of hearing.
She is crazy/psycho. She is mentally disturbed.	She has a mental health condition. She is someone with a behavioral health disorder.
Handicapped parking space; handicapped ramp	Accessible parking space; ramp*

*Ramps make entrances accessible for people with mobility limitations, babies in strollers, and people moving heavy objects or equipment.

Identity First language is preferred by many self-advocates in the autistic, Deaf, and blind communities. It is increasingly preferred by disability rights activists across the spectrum of disability and is on its way to becoming preferred in the mainstream. It recognizes that a person's disability is a fundamental part of who they are, is not something shameful to acknowledge, and can be a positive cultural identifier.

I am disabled. They are non-disabled.
I am d/Deaf.
I am autistic.
A physically disabled Girl Scout
A bipolar physicist
A blind writer

Very generally speaking, "Big D" Deaf is for someone who identifies with Deaf culture, uses ASL (American Sign Language) as their primary means of communication, and is active in the Deaf community. "Little d" deaf refers to the condition of being without hearing or sometimes profoundly hard of hearing. Hard of Hearing is used to describe the condition of having partial hearing.

Resources

For a more in-depth guide for this complicated topic, you might start with the Disability Language Style Guide from the National Center on Disability and Journalism: <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>



Watch **Rogan Shannon** tackle the nuances of Deaf/deaf/hard of hearing in this YouTube video (no audio): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlpJqFeC91E>



Some thoughts on Identity First language from disabled authors:

In 1993 **The National Federation for the Blind** adopted Resolution 93-01 denouncing People First language “because it does the exact opposite of what it purports to do since it is overly defensive, implies shame instead of true equality and portrays the blind as touchy and belligerent”. The resolution also stated that “the word ‘blind’ accurately and clearly describes the condition of being unable to see, as well as the condition of having such limited eyesight that alternative techniques are required to do efficiently the ordinary tasks of daily living that are performed visually by those having good eyesight...”

In their 1998 book *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* **Carol Paddon and Tom Humphries** wrote: “We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language – American Sign Language (ASL) – and a culture. [This identity] is not simply a camaraderie with others who have a similar physical condition but is—like many other cultures in the traditional sense of the term—historically created and actively transmitted across the generations.”

In a 1999 article “Why I Dislike Person First Language” **Jim Sinclair**, co-founder of Autism Network International, wrote that “Saying ‘person with autism’ suggests that autism is something bad, so bad that it isn’t even consistent with being a person. Nobody objects to using adjectives to refer to characteristics of a person that are considered positive or neutral.”

In a 2021 article for Massachusetts Advocates for Children, **Jevon Okundaye** wrote: “If someone asked me which language I prefer, I would say identity-first language. One reason I would say I am “an autistic man” as opposed to “a man with autism” is because I want to stand in solidarity with the autistic community, which favors identity-first language over person-first language and sees autism as an important part of who we are. Another reason is because I use identity-first language when talking about other parts of my identity, such as race, and I feel that my disability deserves the same treatment.”