



Using Inclusive and Plain Language for Communicating

People First Language

People First Language is a way of communicating that reflects respect for people with disabilities by choosing words that are accurate, neutral and objective. Emphasis is placed on the person first, rather than using a disability label first. The focus/subject is the person.

Examples

- Say a “person with a disability” instead of “disabled person.”
- Say “a child with epilepsy” instead of “epileptic child.”
- Say “a person with a traumatic brain injury” instead of “brain damaged.”
- Say “accessible parking” rather than “handicapped parking.”

The North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities has a more detailed [guide](#) for writing and speaking about people who live with disabilities.

The National Center on Disability and Journalism at Arizona State University also provides a [Disability Language Style Guide](#), including a version translated into [Spanish](#).

Person-Centered Language in Behavioral Health

Language is also important when speaking about people with mental illness and substance use disorders. [According to Mental Health America](#):

The use of language is critical to ensuring a recovery-oriented and person-centered approach. It is important that people are seen first as people and not seen as their mental health condition. People are not Schizophrenic, Bipolar, or Borderline. People are not cases or illnesses to be managed.

It is important to assess the way we use language and how the use of language reinforces negative biases or promotes empowerment and strengths. In the mental health field, people may self-identify as clients, consumers, peers, survivors, person in recovery. When taking a person-centered approach, people should be identified by the language or title they feel most comfortable with.

Examples

- Instead of mentally ill, say “people living with mental health conditions.”
- Instead of schizophrenic or bipolar, say “a person living with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.”
- Instead of “addict or drunk,” say “a person with a substance use disorder”

[Read more](#) about language and mental health from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.

Everyday Words

Whether you’re writing for the public or providers, using simple, straight-forward and inclusive language will help get your message across. Consider the intended audience and use the language that will make the most sense to them. When you do need to reach a broad, public audience without specialized knowledge about a topic, everyday words are the most appropriate language to help the most people understand the information. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) provides a [guide](#) to everyday words that should be used in public health communication.

Examples

- **Original Sentence:** Access to quality and timely health care is critical for everyone.
- **Plain Language Sentence:** Everyone must be able to get good quality health care services when they need them.

Tips for Communicators

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

Generally speaking, using person-first language is best. But remember that everyone is a unique individual and to respect their approach and preference in how they choose to identify (For example, some in the Deaf culture choose to first identify as Deaf; within the autism community, some choose to identify first as autistic rather than a person with autism). It is important to ask a person how they would like to be identified in any materials you develop.