

## Person-First Language

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People with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the United States, consisting of all ages, genders, religions, ethnicities and socioeconomic indicators. However, the language sensitivity we generally extend to racial and gender minorities, for instance, hasn't as consistently or widely extended to people with disabilities.

Historically, terminology for people with disabilities was coined by the medical profession, giving greater language significance to the disability type than individuals with disabilities. People with disabilities traditionally have been labeled by disability group, disease or assistive devices they use – the blind, the deaf, diabetics, amputees, walkers, wheelchairs or crutch users.

More and more, however, the emphasis and terminology are changing to give more language emphasis to individuals instead of medical conditions.

Language is being used more often to accentuate the positive when referring to people with disabilities, which is leading to more positive public attitudes. Person-first language encourages positive attitudes, emphasizing the person first, then the disability and has only recently become familiar and popularly used.

So much traditional and historical language regarding people with disabilities derives from times and social attitudes that are inappropriate and unacceptable today. For instance, the word handicapped come from the term cap in hand, implying that one must beg for his living and is dependent on society. Instead of "handicapped," the people-first language standard is "people with disabilities."

In another example, the word crippled is from the Old English for "to creep" and the adjective form was used to imply inferiority. Instead of "crippled," say a person "has a disability."

Say "a person who has" a particular disability instead of "a person afflicted with," "suffers from," or is "a victim of."

Say "uses a wheelchair" instead of "confined to a wheelchair," since, far from being a confining device, wheelchairs allow mobility and access.

Say "has a congenital disability" instead of "has a birth defect" because people with disabilities are not defective.

Say "a person who is deaf" or "a person who does not speak" instead of "deaf-mute," "deaf" and "dumb" because people who are deaf often can speak and they are not dumb.

Say "person with mental illness" instead of "mental," "crazy," "psycho," "insane" or "nut case" which are all offensive and negative stereotypes.

These are just a few examples of person-first language. It may seem frivolous or unimportant to many, but negative language heard repeatedly can affect the self-esteem, sense of purpose and even the independence of a person with a disability. Acknowledging the positive instead of dwelling on the negative creates an environment for acceptance, improvement and opens up possibilities for even greater accomplishments.

Life is all about attitude. Keep it positive!