

The Arc/People First Language



What is People First Language?

People with disabilities are – first and foremost – people who have individual abilities, interests and needs. They are moms, dads, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students and teachers. About 54 million Americans – one out of every five individuals – have a disability. Their contributions enrich our communities and society as they live, work and share their lives.

People with disabilities constitute our nation’s largest minority group, which is simultaneously the most inclusive and the most diverse. Everyone is represented: of all genders, all ages, all religions, all socioeconomic levels and all ethnic backgrounds. The disability community is the only minority group that anyone can join at any time.

The language a society uses to refer to persons with disabilities shapes its beliefs and ideas about them. Words are powerful; Old, inaccurate, and inappropriate descriptors perpetuate negative stereotypes and attitudinal barriers. When we describe people by their labels of medical diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. In contrast, using thoughtful terminology can foster positive attitudes about persons with disabilities. One of the major improvements in communicating with and about people with disabilities is “People-First Language.” People-First Language emphasizes the person, not the disability. By placing the person first, the disability is no longer the primary, defining characteristic of an individuals, but one of several aspects of the whole person. People-First Language is an objective way of acknowledging, communicating, and reporting on disabilities. It eliminates generalizations and stereotypes, by focusing on the person rather than the disability.

Disability is not the “problem.” For example, a person who wears glasses doesn’t say, “I have a problem seeing,” they say, “I wear/need glasses.” Similarly, a person who uses a wheelchair doesn’t say, “I have a problem walking,” they say, “I use/need a wheelchair.”

Our words and the meanings we attach to them create attitudes, drive social policies and laws, influence our feelings and decisions, and affect people’s daily lives and more. How we use them makes a difference. People First Language puts the person before the disability, and describes what a person has, not who a person is. Using a diagnosis as a defining characteristic reflected prejudice, and also robs the person of the opportunity to fine him/herself.

Representation in the media:

Historically, people with disabilities have been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared or ignored. They have been portrayed as helpless victims, repulsive adversaries, heroic individuals overcoming tragedy, and charity cases who must depend on others for their well being and care. Media coverage frequently focused on heartwarming features and inspirational stories that reinforced stereotypes, patronized and underestimated individuals’ capabilities.

Much has changed lately. New laws, disability activism and expanded coverage of disability issues have altered public awareness and knowledge, eliminating the worst stereotypes and misrepresentations. Still, old attitudes, experiences and stereotypes die hard.

People with disabilities continue to seek accurate portrayals that present a respectful, positive view of individuals as active participants of society, in regular social, work and home environments. Additionally, people with disabilities are focusing attention on tough issues that affect quality of life, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.

Words to Describe Different Disabilities

Here are some ways that people with disabilities are described. This list includes “**outdated**” language – terms and phrases that are offensive. This list also includes respectful words that should be used to describe different abilities, if necessary. If you don’t know what to say, just ask how a person likes to be described. Respect all.

<i>Disability</i>	<i>Outdated Language</i>	<i>Respectful Language Person with....</i>
Blind or Visually Impairment	Dumb, Invalid	Person who is blind/visually impaired
Deaf or Hearing Impairment	Invalid, Deaf-and-Dumb, Deaf-Mute	Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
Speech/Communication Disability	Dumb, “One who talks bad”	Person with a speech / communication disability
Learning Disability	Retarded, Slow, Brain-Damaged, Special Ed	Learning disability
Mental Health Disorder or Illness	Hyper-sensitive, psycho, crazy, insane, wacko, nuts	Mental health disorder or illness
Mobility/Physical Disability	Handicapped, physically challenged, “Special”, deformed, cripple, gimp, spastic, spaz, wheelchair bound, lame, wheelchair user	Person with a mobility or physical disability
Emotional Disability	Emotionally disturbed, unbalanced, “off”	Person with an emotional disability or impairment
Intellectual Disability	Retard, Mentally Retarded, “Special Ed”, handicapped	Person with a lower I.Q.
Short Stature, Little Person	Dwarf, Midget	Someone of short stature, little person
Miscellaneous words and expressions	Victim, stricken with, handicapped, poor thing, failure to thrive, water on the brain	How about just a Person!