

## **Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities**

When writing, it's important to be concise, particularly in journalism. However, sometimes the effort to limit wordiness leads to inappropriate references to people with disabilities. The following guidelines explain preferred terminology and reflect input from more than 100 national disability organizations. These guidelines have been reviewed and endorsed by media and disability experts throughout the country. Although opinions may differ on some terms, the guidelines represent the current consensus among disability organizations. Portions of the guidelines have been adopted into the "Associated Press Stylebook," a basic reference for professional journalists.

**DO NOT FOCUS ON DISABILITY** unless it is crucial to a story. Avoid tear-jerking human interest stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injury. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life for those individuals, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.

**PUT PEOPLE FIRST**, not their disability. Say "woman with arthritis," "children who are deaf" or "people with disabilities." This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation. Despite editorial pressures to be succinct, it is never acceptable to use "crippled," "deformed," "suffers from," "victim of," "the retarded," "the deaf and dumb," etc.

**DO NOT SENSATIONALIZE A DISABILITY** by writing "afflicted with," "crippled with," "suffers from," "victim of" and so on. Instead, write "person who has multiple sclerosis" or "man who had polio."

**DO NOT USE GENERIC LABELS** for disability groups, such as "the retarded" or "the deaf." Emphasize people, not labels. Say "people with mental retardation" or "people who are deaf."

**EMPHASIZE ABILITIES**, not limitations. For example:

- Correct: "uses a wheelchair/braces" or "walks with crutches"
- Incorrect: "confined to a wheelchair," "wheelchair-bound" or "crippled"

Similarly, do not use emotional descriptors such as "unfortunate," "pitiful" and similar phrases.

Disability groups also strongly object to using euphemisms to describe disabilities. Terms such as "handicapped," "mentally different," "physically inconvenienced" and "physically challenged" are considered condescending. They reinforce the idea that disabilities cannot be dealt with directly and candidly.

**SHOW PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AS ACTIVE** participants in society. Portraying persons with disabilities interacting with people without disabilities in social and work environments helps break down barriers and open lines of communications.

**DO NOT PORTRAY SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AS SUPERHUMAN.** Many people with disabilities do not want to be "hero-ized." Like many people without disabilities, they wish to be fully included in our communities and do not want to be judged based on unreasonable expectations.

DO NOT IMPLY DISEASE when discussing disabilities that result from a prior disease episode. People who had polio and experienced after-effects have a post-polio disability. They are not currently experiencing the disease. Do not imply disease with people whose disability has resulted from anatomical or physiological damage (e.g., person with spina bifida or cerebral palsy). Reference to the disease associated with a disability is acceptable only with chronic diseases, such as arthritis, Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis. People with disabilities should never be referred to as "patients" or "cases" unless their relationship with their doctor is under discussion.

LISTED BELOW ARE PREFERRED WORDS THAT REFLECT A POSITIVE ATTITUDE IN PORTRAYING DISABILITIES:

- *Brain injury.* Describes a condition where there is long-term or temporary disruption in brain function resulting from injury to the brain. Difficulties with cognitive, physical, emotional or social functioning may occur. Use "person with a brain injury," "woman who has sustained brain injury" or "boy with an acquired brain injury."
- *Cleft lip.* Describes a specific congenital disability involving lip and gum. The term "hare lip" is anatomically incorrect and stigmatizing. Use "person who has a cleft lip" or "a cleft palate."
- *Deaf.* Deafness refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech though the ear. "Hearing impaired" and "hearing loss" are generic terms used by some individuals to indicate any degree of hearing loss – from mild to profound. These terms include people who are hard of hearing and deaf. However, some individuals completely disfavor the term "hearing impaired." Others prefer to use "deaf" or "hard of hearing." "Hard of hearing" refers to a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. Use "woman who is deaf," "boy who is hard of hearing," "individuals with hearing losses" and "people who are deaf or hard of hearing."
- *Disability.* General term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to, for example, walk, lift, hear or learn. It may refer to a physical, sensory or mental condition. Use as a descriptive noun or adjective, such as "person living with AIDS," "woman who is blind" or "man with a disability." "Impairment" refers to loss or abnormality of an organ or body mechanism, which may result in a disability.
- *Disfigurement.* Refers to physical changes caused by burn, trauma, disease or congenital problems.
- *Down syndrome.* Describes a chromosome disorder that usually causes a delay in physical, intellectual and language development. Usually results in mental retardation. "Mongol" or "mongoloid" are unacceptable.

- *Handicap*. Not a synonym for disability. Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment or by one's self. Some individuals prefer "inaccessible" or "not accessible" to describe social and environmental barriers. "Handicap" can be used when citing laws and situations, but should not be used to describe a disability. Do not refer to people with disabilities as "the handicapped" or "handicapped people." Say "the building is not accessible for a wheelchair-user." "The stairs are a handicap for her."
- *HIV/AIDS*. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is an infectious disease resulting in the loss of the body's immune system to ward off infections. The disease is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). A positive test for HIV can occur without symptoms of the illnesses, which usually develop up to 10 years later, including tuberculosis, recurring pneumonia, cancer, recurrent vaginal yeast infections, intestinal ailments, chronic weakness and fever and profound weight loss. Preferred: "people living with HIV," "people with AIDS" or "living with AIDS."
- *Mental disability*. The Federal Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) lists four categories under mental disability: "psychiatric disability," "retardation," "learning disability" or "cognitive impairment" is acceptable.
- *Nondisabled*. Appropriate term for people without disabilities. "Normal," "able-bodied," "healthy" or "whole" are inappropriate.
- *Seizure*. Describes an involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness, etc., resulting from a neurological condition such as epilepsy or from an acquired brain injury. Rather than "epileptic," say "girl with epilepsy" or "boy with a seizure disorder." The term "convulsion" should be used only for seizures involving contraction of the entire body.
- *Spastic*. Describes a muscle with sudden abnormal and involuntary spasm. Not appropriate for describing someone with cerebral palsy or a neurological disorder. Muscles, not people, are spastic.
- *Stroke*. Caused by interruption of blood to brain. Hemiplegia (paralysis on one side) may result. "Stroke survivor" is preferred over "stroke victim."

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