

Tips on Writing About Disabilities

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Americans with Disabilities Act and Information Technology
Technical Assistance Center*

1. **Introduction:** This fact sheet is designed to go beyond the *AP Stylebook* when writing and speaking about people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act and other civil rights laws encourage a paradigm shift in the way society views people with disabilities. When you report, you are encouraged to do the same by portraying people with disabilities as the valuable, equal and contributing members of society that they are.

When people with disabilities are interviewed, presented and talked about positively on TV and radio and in newspapers and magazines, this practice goes a long way in opening attitudes for change.

2. **Story Sources:** When reporting on disability issues and people with disabilities, remember that *they are just like everyone else*. Careers, economic level, and lifestyles are different for each of them. They are individuals with friends, significant others, spouses, children, families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, challenges, joys and so on. Confining yourself or your story to one presupposed idea or image of the 54 million individuals in the United States with disabilities is limiting.

Use people with disabilities as your sources for any story wherever possible. Asking someone to speak on someone else's behalf, unless your source indicates an inability to speak, is not a preferred method. Unless it's central to the article, someone's disability does not have to be mentioned at all. Similarly, it's not always necessary to describe someone's red hair or blue eyes.

Keep an open mind. Although some people with disabilities have serious illnesses, not everyone with a disability is sick, collects a benefits check, or sits at home alone all day, depressed, with nothing to do.

3. **Omit Stereotypes:** People with disabilities are not courageous, heroic or brave by riding the bus or subway, working, taking a class, grocery shopping, or heading for the mall or museum. People with disabilities don't consider themselves "special." Most likely, they won't be able to "overcome" their disabilities, nor do they live their lives "succeeding in spite of" them. People with disabilities are not always kind, upbeat, cheerful, "good for morale," or unfailingly polite.

"Pity" and "charity" don't belong in a story. This attitude is a throwback to days when people with disabilities were viewed within a "medical model" that said people with disabilities should be treated as patients. They were seen as sick and broken. They had to be "fixed" and made well in order to fit into society. Similarly, the outdated "charity model" says "help these poor people" who can't help themselves. Today, people with disabilities feel comfortable with the way they are.

4. **Tone and Terminology—What to Avoid:** Some disability advocates use the term "super-crip" to describe subjects of stories (usually referring to athletes with disabilities) where the writing style overemphasizes how people with disabilities succeed. Some advocates have coined trendy phrases to describe various disabling conditions, such as "physically challenged" and "mentally challenged." However, these words describe swim meets and chess games more accurately. Instead, *use person-centered language.*

5. **Person-Centered Language:** People with disabilities can describe themselves in any terms they wish. Some think "gimp" or "crip" is acceptable—believing if they themselves use the words, the derogatory sting will go away. On the other hand, mainstream disability groups endorse and support person-centered language as an alternative, which de-emphasizes the condition and emphasizes the person.

Here are examples of positive, empowering words and their outdated, negative counterparts:

Current	Outdated
person who is blind someone with low vision someone who is visually impaired	the blind
person who is deaf hard-of-hearing	the deaf
person who is disabled who has (fill in disability)	crippled, handicapped, lame, halt, deformed, victim, afflicted, epileptic, cerebral palsied, etc.
non-disabled person person without a disability	temporarily able-bodied, normal person, handicapper, "differently abled" (and other trendy terms)
wheelchair user person who uses a wheelchair	wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair

person with mental retardation person who is developmentally disabled	retarded, mentally defective
person with a psychiatric disability	crazy, nuts
seizure	fit
unable to speak uses synthetic speech	dumb, mute
successful, productive	"overcame his/her disability"
person of short stature	dwarf, midget
person with a learning disability	the learning disabled
says she has a disability	admits she has a disability
person who no longer lives in an institution	the deinstitutionalized

- 6. Interviewing Guidelines:** Here are some guidelines for personal interviews.
- a. *Converse directly with the person who has a disability*, not to a companion or sign language interpreter. Use the same interviewing techniques and manner as you usually do. Speak in relaxed, everyday tones.
 - b. If appropriate, *sit in a chair at eye-level with the person*. You and your source will be more comfortable.
 - c. *Always introduce yourself to people who cannot see you*. Otherwise, they won't know you're there.
 - d. *Listen fully and carefully to what someone says*, particularly if he or she has speech difficulty. Using close-ended questions or paraphrasing is helpful. If necessary, follow up in writing.
 - e. When talking with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, *be careful not to inadvertently cover your mouth with your hand*, as some individuals lip-read in addition to using an interpreter. You want him or her to understand what you say.
 - f. *Ask before offering to help someone with a disability*. Some suggestions: Someone's wheelchair is considered his or her personal space. Don't lean on it; ask whether the person needs or wants mobility assistance. If you want to serve as a guide for someone who is blind, ask them what to do before taking their arm and leading them somewhere. Service and guide dogs are not pets. Always ask the person whether it would be OK to pet the animal.
 - g. If in-person or telephone interviews are not feasible, use letter, TTY, or e-mail.

Sources:

If you have specific questions unanswered in these tips, contact [Jennifer Eckel](mailto:jeckel@cessi.net) at jeckel@cessi.net.

Fact Sheet--"Communicating With and About People with Disabilities," the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, October 1995.

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*Available online at <http://www.adata.org/formedia/disabwrite.aspx>.