



National Center on Disability & Journalism

Educating to increase accuracy, fairness and diversity in news reporting.

Style Guide

The style guide is a work in progress, a living document. New words will be added and updates will be made as we both grow and language changes. If a term is not listed, if you disagree with how a term is defined or explained, or you have other feedback, please send an email.

Usage and copyright: © 2002, National Center on Disability and Journalism. NCDJ encourages others to copy and reproduce part or the entire style guide provided any part reproduced is distributed free or at cost of your reproduction and not for profit. Please include a reference to National Center on Disability and Journalism and send NCDJ a copy of any materials in which the guide has been used. Commercial or for-profit ventures: Please contact us directly before reproduction. **It is best, regardless of venture, to check with us first in order to prevent duplication and to make sure you have the most recent updates.** Thank you!

A A A A

able-bodied (also known as: "AB") Refers to a person who does not have a disability. "Non-disabled" or "does not have a disability" is preferred. "Able-bodied" comes from a "physical ability" perspective, excluding the majority of people with disabilities. It also implies people with disabilities do not have "able" bodies. **The term "non-disabled" or the phrase "does not have a disability" is the most neutral.**

Afflicted with (also see "stricken with," "suffers from," "victim of") These terms come with the assumption that a person with a disability is in fact suffering or living a reduced quality of life. Instead, use neutral language when describing a person who *has* a disability. Not every person with a disability "suffers," is a "victim" or "stricken." Instead simply state the facts about the nature of the person's disability. For example, "He *has* muscular dystrophy."

ASL American Sign Language.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) This is federal civil rights legislation created in 1990 to address discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, public accommodations, transportation, telecommunications as well as state and local government services. ADA is acceptable on second reference. The ADA home page is located at: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>

assistance animal (also see "guide dog," "Seeing Eye dog," "service animal") Currently there is no uniform terminology. Animals, mostly dogs, can provide services to a person with a disability, including – but not limited to fetching objects for those who use wheelchairs, providing visual clues for those who are blind or alerting deaf individuals to household audio clues. Seeing Eye dog is a registered trademark with The Seeing Eye in Morristown, NJ
<http://www.seeingeye.org/>

B B B B

birth defect Avoid the term "defect" or "defective" when describing a disability because it indicates that the person is somehow incomplete or sub-par. Instead use terms that simply state the facts of the nature of the disability (when appropriate) such as: "congenital disability," "born with a disability," or "disability since birth."

blind Use as an adjective, not as a noun. Describes a person with complete loss of sight. Many people who are legally blind have some vision, which they sometimes use in combination with canes, dogs and other low vision aids. For them, the label "blind" is inaccurate. For others, use terms such as "visually impaired," person with "low vision" or "partially sighted." Currently there is no uniform terminology. It is best to ask the person which term to use.

The word "blind" is used in colloquial English to imply "ignorance" or "stupidity;" i.e., "Turned a blind-eye," or "blind to the fact," "What? Are you blind?" "Blind" is a short and punchy word, which makes it good for headlines and teases, but it is inaccurate for non-disability issues and misleads when applied to people with low vision. Using "blind" instead of "ignorant" (or other adjectives) is inaccurate and perpetuates stereotypes that people, who are blind, are ignorant. This stereotype can lead to negative assumptions when a person applies for a job or seeks to have equal access to society. It is best not to use colloquial English and instead choose more accurate words.

C C C C

cerebral palsy (CP) Do not refer to a person with CP as "cerebral palsy victim," "cerebral palsied," "spastic" or as "a CP" because these terms define the individual only in terms of their physicality. As when describing people with any kind of disability, the term "CP" can be used to describe the disability but not a person. Do not mention the disability unless it is essential to the story. Phrases such as "she has cerebral palsy" are best.

confined to a wheelchair ("wheelchair") Do not use "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair-bound." Instead, use "person who uses a wheelchair" or

"wheelchair-user." Unless mentioning the wheelchair is essential to the story, leave it out. Avoid using phrases like "wheelchair-rider," "vertically challenged" and similar terms.

congenital disability A person who has a "congenital disability" has a disability since birth. Avoid the term "defect," "birth defect" or "defective" when describing a disability. Use "has a congenital disability," "a disability since birth" or "born with a disability." Only mention the disability when it is pertinent to the story.

cripple, crippled, crippled with Do not use these terms to describe a person with a disability. Much like the way some racial derogatory terms are used, some people with disabilities have taken "cripple," shortened it to "crip," which is used as an "insider" term to refer to other people with disabilities. Some people who use "crip" identify with being a part of "disability culture." However, other people with disabilities find "cripple," in any form, offensive. The basic guideline, then, is to avoid using it altogether.

D D D D

deaf Capitalize when a person identifies as culturally Deaf. Use as an adjective, not as a noun. Describes a person with profound or complete hearing loss. Many people who are "hard of hearing" or "hearing impaired" have a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. "Hearing impaired," "hard of hearing," "hearing loss," "partial hearing loss" and "partially deaf" are some terms used by some individuals to indicate varying degrees of hearing loss from mild to profound." Currently there is no uniform terminology. It is best to ask the person which term to use.

Use: "woman who is deaf," "boy who is hard of hearing," "individuals with hearing losses," "people who are deaf or hard of hearing." Avoid "deaf and dumb" and "deaf-mute."

deaf-dumb, deaf-mute Avoid. These terms refer to a person who does not hear and does not use speech to communicate. "Dumb" originally referred to a person who could not speak, and implied the person was incapable of expressing him or herself. People who are deaf or do not use speech are capable of expressing themselves, but in a different language like American Sign Language. A person who does not voice may be able to hear.

defect, defective Avoid using this term to describe a disability. An offensive example is "She suffers from a defective leg." Instead use "She has a disability."

deformed Best to name the disability.

developmental disabilities This phrase was generated from the Developmental Disabilities Act. It is an umbrella term that is often generalized to mean more than the federal and/or state legal definitions. The legal definition can vary from state to state. Please check with your respective state.

The term generally is used to refer to individuals whose disabilities affect development - acquired at birth or childhood. The federal definition is: "Developmental disabilities are chronic mental and/or physical disabilities which manifest before age 22 and result in functional limitations in at least three of the following areas of life activity: self-care, language, learning, mobility, self-direction, independent living and economic self-sufficiency. Individuals with developmental disabilities require lifelong or extended individual supports. Conditions include, but not limited to autism, mental retardation, epilepsy and cerebral palsy."

disability, disabled General term used for functional limitations that limits one or more of the major life activities such as walking, lifting, learning, breathing, etc. Different laws define disability differently.

When describing an individual do not include their disability unless it is clearly pertinent to a story. If it is, it is best to use people first language, for example: "The writer, who has a disability..." as opposed to "The disabled writer..."

Disability and the people who have disabilities are not monolithic. Do not refer to "The Disabled" as that would be similar to referring to "The Asians", "The Jews" or "The African-Americans". Instead, use "disability community," "disability activist," etc.

Down syndrome Not "Down's," for the genetic, chromosomal disorder first reported in 1866 by Dr. J. Langdon Down. Preferred language is "person with Down syndrome," not "Down syndrome child." Do not use "mongoloid." A syndrome is not a disease or illness. It is not contagious.

dumb This term originally referred to a person who could not speak, and implied the person was incapable of expressing him or herself. People who do not use speech are capable of expressing themselves. For example they may use the writing or a different language like American Sign Language. A person who does not voice may be able to hear.

"Dumb" is also a derogatory term to refer to someone with perceived low intellectual ability.

dwarf (also see "short stature," "little person/people") Avoid the term unless a quote or in a medical diagnosis. This is a medical term applied to people who are of "short stature." Avoid medical model terms when describing the experience of

living with a disability. Instead use: "short stature" or "little person/people." Best to ask the person which term to use.

F F F F

fit This term refers to a seizure or a person having a seizure. It is more accurate to use the term "seizure." "Fit" or "throwing a fit" in colloquial English often implies a person is acting "spoiled" or "out of control" because they are not getting what they want.

G G G G

guide dogs ("assistance animals," "Seeing Eye dogs," "service animals") Currently there is no uniform terminology. Animals, mostly dogs, can provide services to a person with a disability, including, but not limited to, fetching objects for those who use wheelchairs, providing visual clues for those who are blind or alerting deaf individuals to household audio clues. Seeing Eye dog is a registered trademark with The Seeing Eye in Morristown, NJ.
<http://www.seeingeye.org/>

H H H H

handicap, handicapped Should be avoided in describing a disability. Can be used when citing laws and situations.

hard of hearing, hearing impaired Many people who are "hard of hearing" or "hearing impaired" have a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. "Hearing impaired," "hard of hearing," "hearing loss," "partial hearing loss" and "partially deaf" are some terms used by some individuals to indicate varying degrees of hearing loss from mild to profound". Currently there is no uniform terminology. It is best to ask the person which term to use.

I I I I

infantile paralysis This disability is more commonly known as "polio." It is more accurate to use "He had polio as a child." or "She contracted polio as an adult from a vaccine." rather than "He suffers from polio."

injuries are "sustained" or "received," not "suffered."

invalid This term should not be used to describe a person with a disability. The word implies that a person has no abilities and no sense of self, whereas for the vast majority of persons with disabilities, this is rarely the case.

L L L L

lame Avoid using when referencing a person. Some people with and without disabilities are also offended when the term "lame" is used in colloquial English like: "lame excuse."

little people/person Term used to refer to people of short stature. A person who is short stature founded Little People of America. The name of the organization has critics with in and outside of the organization that argue the appropriateness of that term. The name is a move away from the medical terminology of "dwarf" and "midget." When writing about people of short stature, it is best to ask the person which term to use.

loon, loony, loony bin Taken from the term "lunatic" any derivative of that word referring an individual seeking therapy, assisted living situations, or mental health fitness is considered a derogatory term.

low vision Describes a person with some vision which they sometimes use in combination with canes, dogs and other low vision aids. Using the term "blind" for someone with "low vision" or who is "partially sighted" is inaccurate. Currently, there is no uniform terminology. It is best to ask the person which term to use.

M M M M

midget (also see "dwarf," "short stature," "little people/person") derogatory term for people of "short stature" or "little people/person."

mute a derogatory term referring to a person who physically cannot speak. It also implies that people who do not use speech are unable to express themselves, which is not true.

N N N N

non-disabled (also see "able-bodied") Refers to a person who does not have a disability. Can also use "does not have a disability."

nuts Derogatory term referring to someone with a psychiatric disability.

P P P P

paraplegic Sometimes people with paraplegia (or who are paraplegic) will refer to themselves as a "para." If so, use in quotes. Otherwise, spell out.

partially sighted (also see "blind") Describes a person with some vision which they sometimes use in combination with canes, dogs and other low vision aids. Using the term "blind" for someone with "low vision" or who is "partially sighted" is inaccurate. Currently, there is no uniform terminology. It is best to ask the person which term to use.

Q Q Q Q

quadriplegia Sometimes people with quadriplegia refer to themselves as "quads." If so, use in quotes. Otherwise, spell out.

S S S S

Seeing Eye dog ("assistance animal," "guide dog," "service animal") Seeing Eye dog is a registered trademark with The Seeing Eye in Morristown, NJ. <http://www.seeingeye.org/> Animals, mostly dogs, can provide services to a person with a disability, including, but not limited to, fetching objects for those who use wheelchairs, providing visual clues for those who are blind or alerting deaf individuals to household audio clues. Currently there is no uniform terminology.

seizure Avoid using "fit" to describe a seizure.

service animal ("assistance animal," "guide dog," "Seeing Eye dog") Animals, mostly dogs, can provide services to a person with a disability, including, but not limited to, fetching objects for those who use wheelchairs, providing visual clues for those who are blind or alerting deaf individuals to household audio clues. Currently there is no uniform terminology. Seeing Eye dog is a registered trademark with The Seeing Eye in Morristown, NJ. <http://www.seeingeye.org/>

short stature ("little people/person") Preferred term, along with "little people/person" for the medical terminology of "dwarf" and "midget." Do not use medical model terms when describing the experience of living with a disability. A person who is short stature founded Little People of America. The name of the organization has critics with in and outside of the organization that argue the appropriateness of that term. Some people prefer "short stature" instead of "little people/person." Best to ask the person which term to use.

spastic It is not appropriate for describing a person with cerebral palsy or other disabilities. Muscles, not people, are spastic. Referring to someone as a "spaz" is equally inappropriate.

special, special needs Avoid when describing to a person with a disability or the programs designed to serve them, with the exception of government

references or formal names of organizations and programs. It is more accurate to use the term "specific," "specific accommodation" or "disability" depending on the context.

stricken with ("afflicted with," "suffers from," "victim of") These terms come with the assumption that a person with a disability is in fact suffering or living a reduced quality of life. Instead, use neutral language when describing a person who has a disability. Not every person with a disability "suffers," is a "victim" or "stricken". Instead simply state the facts about the nature of the person's disability For example, "He has muscular dystrophy."

stutter Use "people who stutter," not "stutterers." Use as an adjective, not a noun.

suffers from ("afflicted with," "stricken with," "victim of") These terms come with the assumption that a person with a disability is in fact suffering or living a reduced quality of life. Instead, use neutral language when describing a person who has a disability. Not every person with a disability "suffers," is a "victim" or "stricken". Instead simply state the facts about the nature of the person's disability For example, "He has muscular dystrophy."

T T T T

temporarily able-bodied (TAB) A term used to refer to the notion that sooner or later, everyone will acquire some kind of disability. This is not a uniformly accepted term.

U U U U

uses a wheelchair (also see "wheelchair") People use wheelchairs for independent mobility. Some people prefer "person who uses a wheelchair" or "wheelchair-user." Avoid using "confined to a wheelchair," "wheelchair-bound," "wheelchair-rider," and "vertically challenged."

V V V V

vertically challenged Used in colloquial English to refer to a person who is "not tall enough." Applying this term to a person with a disability such as a person of short stature or someone who uses a wheelchair is inaccurate.

veg, vegetable, vegetative state These terms are inaccurate when used to describe people without physical, sensory or cognitive functioning. Instead, use

precise medical terminology or general terms such as "comatose" or "non-responsive."

victim, victim of ("afflicted with") These terms come with the assumption that a person with a disability is in fact a victim, suffering or living a reduced quality of life. Instead, use neutral language when describing a person who has a disability. Not every person with a disability "suffers," is a "victim" or "stricken". Instead simply state the facts about the nature of the person's disability For example, "He has muscular dystrophy."

visual impairment (also see "blind") Describes a person with some vision which they sometimes use in combination with canes, dogs and other low vision aids. Using the term "blind" for someone with "low vision" or who is "partially sighted" is inaccurate. Currently, there is no uniform terminology. It is best to ask the person which term to use.

W W W W

Wheelchair Unless mentioning a wheelchair is essential to the story, leave it out. People use wheelchairs for independent mobility. Do not use "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair-bound." Instead, use "person who uses a wheelchair" or "wheelchair-user." Avoid phrases like "wheelchair-rider" and "vertically challenged." Nonusers often associate wheelchairs with illness and aging, and may meet them with fear. Keep in mind that a wheelchair can be a source of freedom and independence. Describing someone as being "confined to a wheelchair" is akin to making a judgment about them. The definition of "confined" is relative, after all; people who need to use a wheelchair and do not have one might be confined to bed, home, etc.

wheelchair-bound (also see "wheelchair") A person is not bound to a wheelchair; a wheelchair enables a person to be mobile. Use wheelchair-user or uses a wheelchair.

Bibliography

This guide is edited from sources listed below and input from numerous individuals.

California Governor's Committee for Employment of Disabled Persons, *Language Guide on Disability: A Primer on how to say what you mean to say*. 1994.

Easter Seals, *Awareness is the first step towards Change: Tips for Portraying People with Disabilities in the Media*. Chicago, IL.

Independent Living Resource Center - San Francisco, *Reporting and Writing about Persons with Disabilities*.

Johnson, Mary and Susan Elkins, editors. *Reporting on Disability: Approaches and Issues*. Avocado Press, Louisville, KY, 1989.

National Challenge Committee of the Disabled, *Guidelines for reporting and Writing about people with disabilities*, Washington, DC, 1984.

Nelson, Jack A. *Reporting on People with Disabilities: A Glossary of Terms in The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age*. Originally published in 1990 by American Society of Newspaper Editors Disability Committee.

President's Committee on Employment of people with disabilities, *The Disability Messenger: A guide to disability coverage*, Unity 99, 1999.

Presidents Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, *Communications sub committee - style guide working group discussions*, 2001.

Research and Training Center on Independent Living for Underserved Populations, Rehabilitation and Independent Living at the University of Kansas, *Guidelines on Language to use when Writing about Disability*. 5th edition, 1996.

Williams, Bruce and The National Association for Journalists with Disabilities (now defunct), *A Glossary of Terms*, early 1990's.