
Acceptable Terms and Terms to Avoid

- ▶ **Able-bodied** – This term implies “us” vs. “them” since it excludes the majority of people with disabilities. Replace with “Person without a disability” or “non-disabled person.”
- ▶ **Afflicted with** – This term assumes that a person is prohibited from enjoying their life because of their disability. It is meant to elicit pity from the reader. If replacement is necessary, simply state the nature of the disability. For example, “David has cerebral palsy.”
- ▶ **Birth defect** – The word “defect” or “defective” implies that there is something inherently wrong with the individual or they are somehow less than human. “Congenital disability” is the preferred term. “Person born with a disability” is also acceptable.
- ▶ **Confined to a wheelchair** – Wheelchairs give a person the freedom to live active and productive lives. If a person didn’t have a wheelchair, they would be confined. Instead, say that someone “uses a wheelchair” or is a “wheelchair user.”
- ▶ **Cripple or Crippled** – These are archaic terms which have become derogatory and are frequently shortened to slang terms. They are offensive and should be avoided at all costs. Again, using “person with a physical disability” or “person with a disability” is preferred.
- ▶ **Deformed** – Avoid using this term. It is offensive and implies that the individual is not fully human. Never say things like “She has severe facial deformities.” Consider if it is truly necessary to mention specifics about someone’s disability. Generally speaking, it probably isn’t. Saying “she has a disability” is probably sufficient.
- ▶ **Handicapped** – This is an archaic term generally reserved for legislation and legal statutes. It should be avoided when writing about people with disabilities. “Person with a disability” is preferred.
- ▶ **Invalid** – This term should never be used to describe a person with a disability. It implies that a person has no abilities at all and is completely inactive. For the vast majority of people with disabilities, nothing could be further from the truth. Generally, this term is used to elicit pity. Consider why you would want to use this term. People with disabilities do not want to be pitied.
- ▶ **Lunatic, loony/loony bin** – These are slang terms. On occasion, they find their way into news stories. They should be avoided at all costs. Use “person with a mental illness” or “hospital.” If it is necessary, you can use “psychiatric facility.”



- ▶ **Retarded** – This is an outdated term and now carries derogatory meanings in our society. “Person with intellectual and developmental disabilities” has replaced it both in federal legislation through Rosa's Law (Pub. L. 111-256) and it is no longer a medical diagnosis having been replaced in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). So there is NEVER an acceptable place to use it.
- ▶ **Schizophrenic** – Terms such as this focus primarily on the disability, not the person. “Person with Schizophrenia” or “person living with a mental illness” is preferred.
- ▶ **Stricken with or suffers from** – These are terms which assume that the person with the disability has a reduced quality of life compared to a non-disabled person. Use respectful and neutral terms like “person with a disability.” Never make assumptions about the quality of someone’s life.
- ▶ **Vegetable/vegetative** – These terms are highly offensive and compare human beings to something that is not human. It is preferable to use precise medical terminology such as “comatose” or “non-responsive.” Depending on the situation, it may also be appropriate to say “profound disability.”
- ▶ **Victim** – Never say that a person is a “victim” of his or her disability. Disabilities are a natural part of the human experience. People with disabilities live full and rich lives. Calling them victims is insensitive and inaccurate. Simply say “person with a disability.” Again, do not try to elicit pity. People with disabilities do not want to be pitied.

Southall, Betsy (2004). *A reporter's guide: Reporting about people with disabilities*. West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council: Charleston, WV

**For further questions contact us at 304-422-3151 or toll-free at 1-877-334-6581
Alexis Ullmann - ext. 114**

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**Program funded by the West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council
1917 Dudley Ave. • Parkersburg, WV 26101 • 304-422-3151 • www.peoplefirstwv.org**