

---

# Language Is More than a Trivial Concern!

***By June Isaacson Kailes  
Disability Policy  
Consultant***

10th Edition  
2010



---

Acceptable and unacceptable disability-related terms change over time. These terms are also subject to continuing debate. Thus, this is an evolving article and comments from readers are encouraged. Please feel free to improve on or take exception to the material. If you disagree with points made, or are aware of negative and biased terms that are not listed, or know of additional alternatives for these terms, please let the author know. Your input is important to this process and if your contribution is used you will receive credit and an acknowledgment in the next updated version of this article.

Published and distributed by Harris Family Center for Disability and Health Policy  
[www.hfcdhp.org](http://www.hfcdhp.org).

Permission is granted to copy and distribute this material provided that:

1. Proper copyright notice and citation is attached to each copy;
2. No alterations are made to the contents of the document;
3. Document is not sold for profit; and
4. June Isaacson Kailes, Disability Policy Consultant is notified of such use,  
Please contact [jik@pacbell.net](mailto:jik@pacbell.net)

## We Welcome Your Comments

Send comments to:  
June Isaacson Kailes, Disability Policy Consultant  
[jik@pacbell.net](mailto:jik@pacbell.net) | [www.jik.com](http://www.jik.com)

The dictionary is.....only a rough draft.

Monique Wittig  
and Sande Zeig

© Edition 2010 - June Isaacson Kailes, Disability Policy Consultant  
[jik@pacbell.net](mailto:jik@pacbell.net) <http://www.jik.com>

### Required Citation

Kailes, J., Language is More Than a Trivial Concern, Edition 10, 2010: KAILES - Publications, Revised 1984-2010. <http://www.jik.com>, [jik@pacbell.net](mailto:jik@pacbell.net).

---

---

## Language Quiz

Are you perpetuating negative attitudes and false stereotypes of people with disabilities with the language you use? Take this short quiz to test your awareness of disability-related language. Answers can be found at the end of this article.

Read the attached article **LANGUAGE IS MORE THAN A TRIVIAL CONCERN!** to understand the “whys” regarding acceptable versus offensive terms.

Please place an “A” before those terms you are acceptable and a “U” before those terms you believe are unacceptable.

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> invalid                  | <input type="checkbox"/> spastic                     | <input type="checkbox"/> midget                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> disfigured               | <input type="checkbox"/> deaf and dumb               | <input type="checkbox"/> able-bodied person              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> handicapped              | <input type="checkbox"/> confined to a wheelchair    | <input type="checkbox"/> afflicted                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> disability               | <input type="checkbox"/> person without a disability | <input type="checkbox"/> deformed                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> person with a disability | <input type="checkbox"/> physically challenged       | <input type="checkbox"/> maimed                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> disabled people          | <input type="checkbox"/> humpback                    | <input type="checkbox"/> people of short stature         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> special people           | <input type="checkbox"/> is cerebral palsied         | <input type="checkbox"/> moron                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> wheelchair bound         | <input type="checkbox"/> retarded                    | <input type="checkbox"/> a person who has seizures       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> wheelchair user          | <input type="checkbox"/> crazy                       | <input type="checkbox"/> has cerebral palsy              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> stroke patient           | <input type="checkbox"/> has an emotional disability | <input type="checkbox"/> disability community            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> polio victim             | <input type="checkbox"/> birth defect                | <input type="checkbox"/> deaf mute                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> crippled                 | <input type="checkbox"/> a psychiatric disability    | <input type="checkbox"/> a person who is deaf            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> imbecile                 | <input type="checkbox"/> has fits                    | <input type="checkbox"/> feeble-minded                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> idiot                    |  | <input type="checkbox"/> person with a speech impairment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> normal person            |  |  |



## Language Is More than a Trivial Concern

June Isaacson Kailes,  
Disability Policy Consultant



Our words affect our thoughts,  
Our thoughts affect our beliefs,  
Our beliefs affect our feelings,  
Our feelings affect our behavior,  
and  
Our behavior affects the world!

Shirley Devol VanLieu

Some people say that language is a trivial concern and the disability rights movement has much more pressing issues to concentrate on. There are indeed many significant disability issues which need our advocacy and energy, and they include language. Language is powerful. It structures our reality and influences our attitudes and behavior. Words can empower,

encourage, confuse, discriminate, patronize, denigrate, inflame, start wars and bring about peace. Words can elicit love and manifest hate, and words can paint vivid and long lasting pictures.

Public attitudes about disability are usually much more disabling than an actual disability. Attitudinal barriers are the most difficult barriers to break through. The challenge is to change attitudes by using many channels: legislation, regulation, enforcement, integration, education, relationships and LANGUAGE.

Language goes hand-in-hand with social change—both shaping it and reflecting it.

Rosalie Maggio

Communication provides the legs for bias, carrying it from person to person, from generation to generation. Eventually, however, communication will be the way to end discrimination.

International Association of  
Business Communicators

A significant element in the struggle for human rights is what people call themselves. For example, “Negro” became “Black” and “African-American;” “Indian” became “Native American;”

and “ladies” and “girls” became “women.” People with disabilities, frustrated and dissatisfied with the common negative terms used to describe disability, are still struggling to speak in unison about what they choose to call ourselves. Terms such as “crippled,”

“disabled” and “handicapped” have been imposed from the outside, from definitions derived from social services, medical institutions, governments and employers. Preferred terminology continues to change and evolve.

This article urges you to develop a heightened awareness of language and to develop the ability to choose disability-related terms that describe diversity in accurate and respectful ways. It also explains why some terms are viewed as either neutral and objective or offensive and subjective.

Avoiding negative attitudes and stereotypes means neutralizing disability-related

**Stereotypes are based on assumptions that run deep in our culture – so deep that they can slip by unnoticed unless our awareness is continually sharpened and refined.**

**Matina S. Horner**

terms. Disability-related language should be precise, objective, and neutral in order to avoid reinforcing negative values, biases and stereotypes. Unfortunately disability-related terms often are subjective and covertly, through innuendos and tone, carry excess baggage in the form of feelings, biases and attitudes. When used, these terms

are often offensive to people with disabilities. They often cringe, lose attention or sometimes strongly react when confronted with such ablist and handicapist language which is subjective and biased language reflecting discriminatory attitudes and practices. Such use of language promotes distance, sets up we versus them and superior versus inferior relationships, and carries connotations regarding values, expectations, skills, and abilities (good versus bad, strong versus weak, fast versus slow, high versus low expectations, and well versus sick). Here are a few examples from the popular press:

**One of the most basic ways of showing respect for others is to refer to them by the names with which they have chosen to identify themselves and to avoid using names that they consider offensive.**

**(American Heritage Book of English Usage)**

**The correct names for individuals and groups are always those they have chosen for themselves.**

**Rosalie Maggio**

“Wrecked by Lou Gehrig's disease, the body of the greatest cosmic thinker since Einstein huddles helplessly in a wheelchair...What's left of Stephen Hawking, the physical man, is a big head ripped by a drooling grin and a body collapsed into a pile of wasted limbs, ravaged by ALS...”

*People Magazine*, December, 1988

“The lame and blind, the paraplegics and quadriplegics, those with limbs deformed and spines congenitally twisted came to gaze at the newest wonders with the potential to lessen the hardship in their lives.

In two days, nearly 1,000 people - most of them disabled - visited one of the first trade fairs and symposiums on high tech devices for the handicapped.”

Terry Finn, *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1983

“It is allowing the silent to speak and the immobile to move; it has enabled the nearly helpless to function with some independence and can even be used to regulate a paralyzed person's immediate surroundings.”

Terry Finn, *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1983

“...(describing a wheelchair) that steel imprisonment that long has been deemed the dystrophic child's plight.”

Jerry Lewis, quoted in *Parade Magazine*, September 2, 1990

“Among the runners will be the lame, the halt and the blind.” And “A multiple sclerosis victim has been preparing to do the event in a wheelchair. Her coach is total {sic} blind.”

Seymour Rothman, sports columnist, *Toledo Blade*,  
November 3, 1990, “New York City Marathoners are the  
Strangest People.”

“There was a paraplegic kid in the handicapped section above a railing of the Metrodome. When Dan Gladden hit his grand slam...the kid...yelled and shook his fists, but he was a prisoner of his wheelchair. It isolated him in an arena filled with

55,000 people. He wanted to share the physical kinship and exhilaration with the swaying bodies around him, and he couldn't break free to do it. He turned once more and held his arms out. His eyes seemed to be making an appeal....”

*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 28, 1987

“Here is a 42-year old woman who will never walk again, who lives on SSI, and even in her wheelchair is a member of the New York City Housing Authority Tenant's patrol... She is imprisoned in a wheelchair.”

*New York's Newsday*, November 13, 1987

“... she drives a car, rides a horse, skis, studies martial arts -and is confined to a wheelchair.” And “She and two friends, also wheelchair-bound...”

*Playboy Magazine*, “Meet Ellen Stohl”

“Our clients: They are victims of muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, autism, sight and hearing loss and crippling accidents.”

The Jeffrey Foundation's fact sheet (early 1980s)

“There is a constitutional crisis in Washington ... If you don't see that on TV, .... if you don't read that in the paper every day, you must be deaf, blind and dumb.”

Democratic Congressman Chris Perkins of Kentucky, quoted in the *Louisville Courier Journal*

**Neutral and bias free rewrites of these examples are at the end of this article.**

**To speak “mere words” is much like speaking of “mere dynamite.”**

**C. J. Ducasse**

Use of such disability-related deficiency oriented language obscures other characteristics, abilities and strengths of people. It affects the way people are thought of and treated.

Deficiency oriented language can also harm people by undermining their sense of capability and can sometimes trigger negative self-fulfilling prophecies. The use of

---

value-laden labels which convey conscious messages of devaluation, dependence, and deficiencies place some people at risk of adopting a reduced sense of self-worth, self-direction, and power.

Disability advocates strive for equality, accessibility and acceptance, yet they are continually confronted by language which perpetuates negative stereotypes of who they are. People with disabilities, disability rights activists, service providers, health care providers, writers, reporters, editors, educators and supporters must become aware of the power of language. Are you perpetuating negative attitudes and false stereotypes of people with disabilities with your language?

There are complaints that it's hard to remember what you can say and what you can't, which words are "in" for certain groups and which words are not. And yet we started out learning that the "kitty" on the sidewalk was actually a squirrel, we learned to differentiate between fire trucks and school buses, and many persons today know the difference between linguini, fettucini, and rotini. The same people who say they can't remember the "right" terms in referring to people are often whizzes at remembering which professional sports teams have moved where and are now called what. It just takes effort.

Rosalie Maggio



---

## DISABILITY vs. HANDICAPPED

“Handicapped” connotes the negative image of a person on the street corner with a “handy cap” in hand begging for money. The word "disability" is not perfect, as it still implies a negative – what a person cannot do – but it has become the most widely used and accepted among people with disabilities.



In the past, laws favored and institutionalized the word “handicapped.” Today disability-related legislation use the terms “people with disabilities” and “disability.” Government entities and organizations such as the National Council on Disability changed its name from the National Council on the Handicapped.

A disability is a condition and a handicap is a barrier or obstacle which a person with a disability may encounter in the environment. People are not handicapped by their disability all the time. A wheelchair user is not handicapped in an environment where there are accessible routes and features. A person who is deaf is not handicapped when sign language interpreters are available for an event and media presentations are captioned and signed. People who are blind are not handicapped when using elevators with audible signals and computers equipped with screen readers that covert text to voice and read aloud text which is on the screen (voice output) and in buildings where key signs include Braille, raised characters and legible signage. A disability can mean that a person may do something differently as compared to a person without a disability, but with equal participation and equal results.

A disability can become a handicap when problems related to the environment and / or negative attitudes are present. The environment and attitudes frequently cause the handicap that limits participation, productivity, integration, independence and equality. If a person with a disability cannot accept a job because it is located on the second floor of a building without an elevator, the real problem is the lack of an elevator. When a person cannot attend a training program because there are no ramps, curb cuts, sign language interpreters, Braille or audio or large print material, the problem is a lack of access.

---

## Recommendations

### Use

- “Handicap” to describe an obstacle or barrier imposed by the environment or society
- Accessible parking spaces, accessible bathrooms, accessible guest room



- “Disability” to refer to a functional limitation that limits a person’s ability to see, hear, read, remember, learn understand, talk, walk, breath, etc.
- People without disabilities

### Avoid

- Handicapped as an adjective when describing accessible features
- Handicapped parking, handicapped bathroom, handicapped guest room



- Able bodied people. Many people with disabilities believe they have able bodies. It is the environment that causes the handicap.



## PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The term “disabled people” is a short cut to the more involved and sometimes more awkward, but preferred expression, “people with disabilities.” It depicts people with disabilities as people, with multi-dimensional characteristics in addition to their disability. For example, a woman who has a disability as a result of polio and uses a wheelchair may also be a mother, a wife, a doctor, a board member, a gifted public speaker, etc. A man who has quadriplegia as a result of an auto accident is not a “vegetable.” Although he has a significant physical disability, he can be an active, contributing, productive member of society. Disability is one of many characteristics.

“Disabled people” can represent differentness and separateness, reducing people’s identity to only their disability. We don't refer to people with AIDS as “AIDS people.”



---

There are exceptions to this guideline for people who are deaf who refer to themselves as “the Deaf” with a capital D. Many people who are deaf consider themselves members of a culture which has its own language. There are also people in the disability community who support the phrase “disabled people” as representing a sense of pride, power, common culture, history and experience.

Diagnostic disability types and labels are often used to determine eligibility in community and government service and benefit systems, but they are not appropriate when describing individuals. People do not want to be labeled by a condition or limitation i.e., Dandruff Dan, Cancerous Chris, Pimply Pedro, Warty Wendy, Obese Oscar, Psoriasis Pam.

## **Recommendations**

### **Use**

- Use “people with disabilities” or “people who are blind”
- He has arthritis
- She has cerebral palsy

### **Avoid**

- “The disabled” or “the blind”
- He is arthritic, she is cerebral palsied, spastic

# WHEELCHAIR USER vs. WHEELCHAIR BOUND/CONFINED TO A WHEELCHAIR

People are not bound to wheelchairs. “Wheelchair bound” or “confined to a wheelchair” conveys a stereotype that portrays people who use wheelchairs as devalued, impotent, slow and passive. People use wheelchairs to increase their mobility, similar to the way people use cars. Many people who use wheelchairs can walk but choose to use a wheelchair or a scooter because of such functional limitations as



reduced endurance, decreased balance, or slow walking speed. Often ability, productivity, independence, ease and speed of movement are increased by wheelchair use. For many, a wheelchair means increased

mobility and freedom; it does not mean being confined. People who use wheelchairs transfer to cars, chairs, beds, etc. Thus, they are neither confined nor bound to their wheelchairs.



*Used with permission, The Disability Rag, July 1985*



*Graphic courtesy of Ontario Federation of Cerebral Palsy, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

## Recommendation

### Use

- Wheelchair user, a person who uses a wheelchair

### Avoid

- Wheelchair bound and confined to a wheelchair

---

# PATIENT

Most people are patients at some point, but this does not mean that people are constant patients and always should be called patients. Patient is an adjective that frequently gets paired with people with disabilities. It is common to hear expressions like “a multiple sclerosis patient is in my class,” or “he is an Alzheimer’s patient.” “Stroke patients walk in the mall every day.” The words conjure up a vision of a people walking in the mall with IVs and EKG wires attached to their chest, accompanied by their doctors.



Pairing people with disabilities with “patient” medicalizes people. It gives them a permanent status of “eternal and chronic patients” and reinforces a common misconception that people with disabilities are sick. People with disabilities are not constant patients and most people with disabilities are not sick.

## Recommendations

### Use

- “Patient” correctly expresses a relationship with a health care provider such as a physician or a hospital. It is a poor word choice for other uses.
- “Patient” is an adjective only when an individual is actively, at the moment, being treated or seen by a health care professional.

### Avoid

- Alzheimer’s patient, multiple sclerosis patient, stroke patient

---

## CRIPPLED

“Crippled” is derived from an old English word meaning “to creep.” *Webster's New World Dictionary* gives a second meaning to the word “cripple” which is “inferior.” These are derogatory images which perpetuate negative stereotypes!

### Recommendation

#### Use

- She has a disability

#### Avoid

- She is crippled

## FRAIL

“Frail” elicits a chain reaction of low expectations. “Frail” means “easily led into evil” or “easily broken or destroyed,” physically weak, slight, and unsubstantial. “Frail” does not describe people in control of their own destiny. Use of the term distances and devalues.



### Recommendation

#### Use

- Older people with disabilities can live independently

#### Avoid

- Frail people can live independently

---

## NORMAL PERSON

One could argue about the definition of the word “normal” indefinitely. “Normal people,” when used in contrast to “people with disabilities” implies that people with disabilities are not normal. If you are referring to a person who does not have a disability, it is more accurate and less stereotypical to refer to the person as “a person without a disability.”

### Recommendation

#### **Use**

- People with and without disabilities

#### **Avoid**

- Disabled people, healthy people, whole people, and normal people

## OVERCOME

People cope with, adjust to and live with a disability. Disability is a characteristic and just as one does not overcome being black; one does not overcome having a disability. People overcome social, economic, psychological, attitudinal, architectural, transportation, education and employment barriers.

### Recommendation

#### **Use**

- She lives with (copes with) a disability

#### **Avoid**

- She overcame her disability



---

## **SPECIAL**

Variation in human ability is ordinary, not special, and, affects most of us for some part of our lives. People with disabilities should not be labeled as being “special.” Using “special” to describe this large population of people with disabilities, is equivalent to describing all Hispanics or all women as “special.” Although the term is often used in descriptions such as “special education,” it is vague, patronizing, inappropriate, and distancing. “Special” is often viewed by the disability community as an offensive euphemism for segregated and isolated as it implies differentness and apartness. It is beyond time to retire this term.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Use**

- People with disabilities
- Accessible buses, accessible hotel guest rooms

#### **Avoid**

- Special people
- Special buses, special hotel guest rooms

## **SUFFER**

An individual who has a disability does not necessarily suffer. “Suffer” conveys a stereotypical attitude of never-ending pain, torture or mourning. If one wants to say a particular person is suffering, this point should be developed explicitly. Mourning is one of the stages involved in adjusting to disability. It is not a chronic state.

### **Recommendation**

#### **Use**

- Person with a hearing loss

#### **Avoid**

- Suffers from hearing loss

---

# VICTIM

The word “victim” is appropriate to use immediately after a diagnosis, an injury or having experienced some form of abuse (victim of a violent crime, accident victim, or rape victim). It is inappropriate to use the word to describe an ongoing status. A person is not a lifetime Multiple Sclerosis victim, Cerebral Palsy victim or stroke victim. Being constantly referred to as a “victim” reinforces the helplessness and degradation of the initial experience.

## Recommendation

### Use

- Person who has had a stroke

### Avoid

- Multiple sclerosis victim, stroke victim

# EUPHEMISMS

Disability culture is the commonality of the experience of living with disability, and language is one of the keys to acknowledging this culture. In an effort to choose alternative terms, some people have coined such words and terms as “inconvenienced,” “able-disabled,” “differently-able,” “handicapper,” “handi-capable,” “mentally challenged” and “physically challenged.” These terms sound like slogans from a failed public relations campaign. These euphemisms are not widely endorsed by the disability community because they deny and trivialize the reality of a disability. These misguided fad phases actually offend many people with disabilities.

Physically challenged, for example, is a status people with disabilities do not want to accept. People with disabilities believe that it is a civil right to be able to use an environment free of physical and communication barriers. The focus should be on removing barriers. It is not the individual who needs fixing. The challenge and the burden are not on the person with a disability, but on society! These barriers are not the challenges most people with disabilities would choose.

---

# METAPHORS

Disability related metaphors also do not help the perception of disability.

## **Avoid**

- A deaf ear to the pleas of the people
- An airline strike cripples the nation
- Blind ambition
- Blind as a bat
- Blind justice
- Crippled by inaction
- Crippling fear
- Dumb luck
- Lame idea
- Paralyzed by fear
- The blind leading the blind

What's wrong with these metaphors? These metaphors have crept into ordinary language over many years. Metaphors reinforce common misconceptions, stereotypes and negative thinking about disability. They add emotional baggage, reflect unconscious prejudice and sensationalize words and phrases. They are used so often that they are almost unconscious.

No dictionary of a living tongue ever can be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding and some falling away,

Samuel Johnson

| <b>Examples of Preferred Terms regarding People with Disabilities</b>                           |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Acceptable - Neutral*</b>  | <b>Unacceptable - Offensive</b>  |
| He had polio<br>She has multiple sclerosis  | He was <b>afflicted</b> with, <b>stricken</b> with, <b>suffers from</b> , <b>victim of</b> polio, multiple sclerosis, etc. |
| He has arthritis  | He is <b>arthritic</b>   |
| She has cerebral palsy  | She is <b>cerebral palsied</b> , <b>spastic</b>  |
| A person who has had a disability since birth<br>A congenital disability                        | <b>Birth defect</b>  |
| A person who uses a wheelchair<br>A wheelchair user   | <b>Confined to a wheelchair / wheelchair bound</b>   |
| She has a disability  | She is <b>crippled</b>   |
| A person who has a speech disability<br>A person who is hard of hearing<br>A person who is deaf | <b>Dumb, deaf mute, dummy</b> (implies an intellectual disability occurs with a hearing loss or a speech disability)       |
| A person who has a spinal curvature   | <b>A hunchback or a humpback</b>   |
| He has a mental illness.<br>He has an emotional disability<br>He has a psychiatric disability   | He is chronically <b>mentally ill</b> , <b>a nut</b> , <b>crazy</b> , <b>idiot</b> , <b>imbecile</b> , <b>moron</b>        |
| People of short stature   | <b>Midgets, dwarfs</b>   |
| A person who has a speech disability  | <b>Mute</b>  |
| A person without a disability as compared to a person with a disability                         | <b>Normal person, whole person, healthy person, able-bodied person</b> as compared to a disabled person                    |
| She lives with a disability   | <b>Overcame</b> her disability   |
| A person who has a developmental disability or intellectual disability                          | <b>Retard, retardate, mentally retarded, feeble-minded, idiot</b>  |
| Use only when a person is actually ill  | <b>Sick</b>  |
| Use only when a person is actively being seen or treated by a health care provider              | <b>Stroke patient, multiple sclerosis patient</b>  |
| Seizure   | <b>Fit</b>   |
| Older people with disabilities  | <b>Frail</b>   |

\* Always subject to change and continuing debate

**Other words to avoid because they are negative, reinforce stereotypes and evoke pity include:**

|          |            |           |             |      |
|----------|------------|-----------|-------------|------|
| Abnormal | Invalid    | Misshapen | Burden      | Lame |
| Spaz     | Disfigured | Maimed    | Unfortunate |      |

---

Words have their genealogy, their history, their economy, their literature, their art and music, as too they have their weddings and divorces, their successes and defeats, their fevers, their un-diagnosable ailments, their sudden deaths. They also have their moral and social distinctions.

Virgilia Peterson

## SUMMARY

Language *does* play an important role in shaping ideas and attitudes. It takes time to change language habits, but if you are committed to increasing integration, equality, community awareness, acceptance and access, then take the time to be vigilant about the language you use. Just as our society has worked at eliminating pejorative and derogatory and racial and ethnic language, so must it expend the same effort to do the same with removing negative and biased disability language.

Become consciously aware of the images and attitudes you convey with words. Discard negative labels. By doing so, you will help to dispel the myths and enlighten others about the meaning of disability.

Yes, language is constantly changing, but these changes are not as much changes as choices. Firefighter has been in the language since the early 1900s. Using firefighter instead of fireman isn't a change in language, but a choice of using a better term. People make these changes all the time.

So, we're not really talking about language change here as much as the conscious effort to use correct words.

Rosalie Maggio

Clean, precise, writing or speaking requires systematic, sequential thought.  
Words have to be created, not sprayed.  
They need to be fitted together with infinite care.

William Faulkner

## ANSWERS TO LANGUAGE QUIZ\*

|                            |                                  |   |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| U invalid                  | U spastic                        | U midget                                  |
| U disfigured               | U deaf and dumb                  | U able-bodied person                      |
| U handicapped              | U confined to a<br>wheelchair    | U afflicted                               |
| A disability               | A person without a<br>disability | U deformed                                |
| A person with a disability | U physically challenged          | U maimed                                  |
| U disabled people          | U humpback                       | A people of short stature                 |
| U special people           | U is cerebral palsy              | U moron                                   |
| U wheelchair bound         | U retarded                       | A a person who has<br>seizures            |
| A wheelchair user          | U crazy                          | A has cerebral palsy                      |
| U stroke patient           | A has an emotional<br>disability | A disability community                    |
| U polio victim             | U birth defect                   | U deaf mute                               |
| U crippled                 | A a psychiatric disability       | A a person who is deaf                    |
| U imbecile                 | U has fits                       | U feeble-minded                           |
| U idiot                    |                                  | A a person who has a<br>speech impairment |
| U normal person            |                                  |   |

\* What is acceptable and what is unacceptable tends to change over time. These suggested answers are open to continuing debate. This article sensitizes people to the appropriate terminology to use when speaking with or referring to people with disabilities. It challenges readers to be aware of the importance of using disability-neutral terms and gives rationale for specific language preferences when talking to, writing about, or referring to people with disabilities. It gives preferred language examples with reasons for the disability community's preferences.

**RIGHTING OUR WRITING, TWEAKING OUR SPEAKING,  
AND SYNCING OUR THINKING  
SUBTLE AND NOT SO SUBTLE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES**

| <b>Preferred</b>   | <b>Avoid</b>   |
|--|--|
| <p>Mobility limitations<br/>Communication limitations<br/>Limitations in walking, speaking, seeing etc. Disability does not always have to be viewed as a problem.<br/>The problem is often in the perception and in an existing barrier, not within the person.</p> | <p>Problem walking<br/>Problem speaking<br/>Problem seeing</p>   |
| <p>Design that is easier for everyone<br/>Attracting more users, customers, spenders</p>   | <p>Need for special and costly physical barrier removal</p>  |
| <p>Famed astrophysicist, who has ALS, will fly weightless Thursday</p>   | <p>Famed astrophysicist, imprisoned in his body by ALS, will fly weightless Thursday<br/><br/>Mike Schneider, Associated Press, 9:25 a.m. April 26, 2007</p>   |
| <p>Some states "may not make it easy for people with disabilities to vote,"</p>  | <p>The <i>LA Times</i> reported that during Tuesday's argument, Scalia said ... Some states "may not have made it easy for handicaps to vote,"<br/><br/>Special Edition: "Crawl for Justice" Media and Photos, January 16, 2004, <a href="http://www.nfbnet.org/pipermail/blind-law_nfbnet.org/2004January/000762.html">http://www.nfbnet.org/pipermail/blind-law_nfbnet.org/2004January/000762.html</a> last accessed 09.8.10</p> |
| <p>Stephen Hawkings, an internationally known Cambridge University physicist is one of the greatest cosmic thinkers since Einstein. His disability is secondary to his capacity and accomplishments.</p>   | <p>"Wrecked by Lou Gehrig's disease, the body of the greatest cosmic thinker since Einstein huddles helplessly in a wheelchair..What's left of Stephen Hawkings, the physical man, is a big head ripped by a drooling grin and a body collapsed into a pile of wasted limbs, ravaged by ALS..."<br/><br/><i>People Magazine</i>, December, 1988</p>  |

**RIGHTING OUR WRITING, TWEAKING OUR SPEAKING,  
AND SYNCING OUR THINKING**  
**SUBTLE AND NOT SO SUBTLE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES (cont'd)**

| <b>Preferred</b>   | <b>Avoid</b>  |
|--|---|
| <p>People with a variety of disabilities came to gaze at the newest technology related to enhancing abilities and independence. In two days, nearly 1,000 people visited one of the first trade fairs and symposiums on high tech devices for people with disabilities.</p>    | <p>“The lame and blind, the paraplegics and quadriplegics, those with limbs deformed and spines congenitally twisted came to gaze at the newest wonders with the potential to lessen the hardship in their lives.</p> <p>In two days, nearly 1,000 people – most of them disabled – visited one of the first trade fairs and symposiums on high tech devices for the handicapped.”</p> <p>Terry Finn, <i>Los Angeles Times</i>, August 20, 1983</p> |
| <p>It allows people without speech to communicate and it allows people with limited movement to move more freely; it has enabled people with significant disabilities to function with an increased level of independence, and it helps people control their surroundings.</p> | <p>"It is allowing the silent to speak and the immobile to move; it has enabled the nearly helpless to function with some independence and can even be used to regulate a paralyzed person's immediate surroundings."</p> <p>Terry Finn, <i>Los Angeles Times</i>, August 20, 1983</p>  |
| <p>Wheelchairs are used for mobility. They do not confine, imprison or trap!</p>   | <p>“... (describing a wheelchair) that steel imprisonment that long has been deemed the dystrophic child's plight.”</p> <p>Jerry Lewis, quoted in <i>Parade Magazine</i>, September 2, 1990</p>   |
| <p>Among the runners will be people with disabilities, including a 23-year old graduate student who uses a wheelchair.</p>   | <p>“Among the runners will be the lame, the halt and the blind." And "A multiple sclerosis victim has been preparing to do the event in a wheelchair. Her coach is total {sic} blind.”</p> <p>Seymour Rothman, sports columnist, <i>Toledo Blade</i>, November 3, 1990, “New York City Marathoners are the Strangest People.”</p>   |



**RIGHTING OUR WRITING, TWEAKING OUR SPEAKING,  
AND SYNCING OUR THINKING**  
**SUBTLE AND NOT SO SUBTLE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES (cont'd)**

| <b>Preferred</b>   | <b>Avoid</b>   |
|--|--|
| <p>When Dan Gladden hit his grand slam, the kid in the accessible seating section, along with the 55,000 other fans, yelled and shook his fists.</p>           | <p>“There was a paraplegic kid in the handicapped section above a railing of the Metrodome. When Dan Gladden hit his grand slam...the kid...yelled and shook his fists, but he was a prisoner of his wheelchair. It isolated him in an arena filled with 55,000 people. He wanted to share the physical kinship and exhilaration with the swaying bodies around him, and he couldn't break free to do it. He turned once more and held his arms out. His eyes seemed to be making an appeal...”</p> <p><i>Minneapolis Star Tribune,</i><br/>October 28, 1987</p> |
| <p>Margarita Martinez, a 42-year old woman, is a member of the New York City Housing Authority Tenant's patrol. She is a wheelchair user who receives SSI.</p> | <p>“Here is a 42-year old woman who will never walk again, who lives on SSI, and even in her wheelchair is a member of the New York City Housing Authority Tenant's patrol... She is imprisoned in a wheelchair.”</p> <p><i>New York Newsday,</i> November 13, 1987</p>  |
| <p>She drives a car, rides a horse, skis and studies martial arts. She is also a wheelchair user.</p>  | <p>“... she drives a car, rides a horse, skis, studies martial arts -and is confined to a wheelchair.” And “She and two friends, also wheelchair-bound...”</p> <p><i>Playboy Magazine,</i> “Meet Ellen Stohl,”</p>   |

**RIGHTING OUR WRITING, TWEAKING OUR SPEAKING,  
AND SYNCING OUR THINKING**  
**SUBTLE AND NOT SO SUBTLE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES (cont'd)**

| <b>Preferred</b>  | <b>Avoid</b>   |
|---|--|
| <p>Our clients include people with muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, autism, visual and hearing limitation, and disabilities resulting from accidents.</p> | <p>“Our clients: They are victims of muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, autism, sight and hearing loss and crippling accidents.”</p> <p>The Jeffrey Foundation's fact sheet (early 1980s)</p>  |
| <p>If you do not know that there is a constitutional crisis in Washington, you must be very uninformed and certainly have not watched TV or read the newspapers.</p>          | <p>“There is a constitutional crisis in Washington ... If you don't see that on TV, .... if you don't read that in the paper every day, you must be deaf, blind and dumb.”</p> <p>Democratic Congressman Chris Perkins of Kentucky, quoted in the <i>Louisville Courier Journal</i>.</p> |

---

## REFERENCES AND READINGS

- The Disability Rag*, March/April 1992. "Metaphors We Could Do Without," pp 26 -28.
- Hadley, R and Brodwin, M, 1988. "Language About People with Disabilities," *Journal of Counseling and Development*, Vol 67, pp. 147 148.
- Maggio, R, 1997. *Talking About People: A Guide to Fair and Accurate Language*, 3rd edition, Oryx Press.
- Mauro, R, August 4, 1994. *Crips & Words That Hurt*, via e-mail.
- Osgood, C. E., Suci, J., and Tannenbaum, P., 1957. *The measurement of meaning*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 342 p.
- Woodward, J. R. November 1991, "Time to Get Rid of "Special." *The Disability Rag*, p. 35. Also reprinted with permission at <http://www.jik.com/ilcs.html>.
- An earlier version of this article was published in: *JOURNAL OF REHABILITATION*, 1-3/85, "Watch Your Language, Please!"

### Recommended Citation:

Kailes, J., Language is More Than a Trivial Concern, Edition 10, 2010: KAILES - Publications, Revised 1984-2010. <http://www.jik.com>, [jik@pacbell.net](mailto:jik@pacbell.net).

Language doesn't merely reflect the world, it creates it.

Rabbi Donna Berman