Disability Awareness: Disability-Related Language
Est. Time: 45–60 Minutes

Objective

Gain a better understanding of disability-related language, including people-first and identity-first language, and identify instances when inappropriate terminology is used to refer to individuals with disabilities.

Overview

It's important to keep in mind that, whether we realize it or not, the language and terminology we use often reflects our beliefs, perceptions, and misconceptions. Many times, the use of a phrase or term can be demeaning, even if that was not the speaker's intent. Although disability-related language can be confusing and changes across time, it is our responsibility to learn about currently accepted terminology and respect individual preferences. We can do this by avoiding outdated terms, using positive or neutral descriptions, and considering language preferences when referring to or speaking with individuals with disabilities.

Current terminology: As terminology evolves, words or phrases that were once acceptable can take on new connotations. The table below contains a few examples.

Outdated Terminology	Current Terminology
Mental retardation	Intellectual and developmental disability Cognitive disability Intellectual disability
Invalid	An individual with a physical impairment
Slow	A person with a learning disability
Handicapped	A person with a disability

Positive or neutral descriptions: Speakers should use terms that reflect neutral or positive meanings, rather than those that reflect negative assumptions or judgments. The table below offers examples.

Negative Terms	Positive and Neutral Terms
A person: • Is afflicted by • Suffers from • Is a victim of a disability	A person has a disability
Bound to a wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair
Crazy	Person with an emotional disorder
Low achieving	Struggling learner

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Word order: In the disability community, some people prefer the use of *people-first language* while others choose to use *identity-first language*. The distinction here is the order in which the person and the disability occur.

- **People-first language:** Also referred to as person-first language, this preference refers to the person before the disability (e.g., person with a disability). Advocates of people-first language prefer to keep the primary focus on the individual, rather than the disability.
- **Identity-first language:** This preference refers to the disability before the person (e.g., disabled person). Advocates of identity-first language feel that their disability is an integral part of their identity and use such terminology to express their disability pride.

The table below compares these two preferences.

People-First Language	Identity-First Language
Person with a disability	Disabled person
Student with autism	Autistic student
Adult who is deaf	Deaf adult
Person who is blind	Blind person

As with any guidelines, there is subjectivity and nuance. For example, some people find euphemisms (e.g., *special needs*, *differently abled*) offensive, while others have no problem with that terminology. Additionally, some individuals feel that their disability includes membership within a community, group, or subculture. The two most common examples are people with hearing loss and those with autism. Some who have hearing loss and use American Sign Language (ASL) proudly identify with the culture and consider themselves members of the Deaf community. Similarly, some individuals with autism feel that their disabilty is a central part of their identity and prefer to be referred to as autistic.

For Your Information

Not every member of every group agrees with these terminology choices, and terminology will continue to change. But school personnel who are aware of these issues and who exhibit thoughtfulness and sensitivity when referring to individuals with disabilities can avoid offending students and their families.

Activity

Conduct a search of news stories about individuals with disabilities in a variety of formats (e.g., newspaper, magazine, Internet). Note the use of:

1. Appropriate (i.e, current, positive) and inappropriate (i.e., outdated, negative) terminology

2. People-first language and identity-first language

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Discussion Topics

1. What other terms have you heard that refer to individuals with disabilities? Are these terms appropriate or inappropriate? Explain.

2. In your search of news stories, what did you discover? Were you surprised by any of your findings? Explain.

3. How important do you think it is that reporters use appropriate terminology? Explain your answer.

4. Imagine that as a teacher you overhear one of your students using an inappropriate term to refer to another student who has a disability. How would you respond and why?

5. Reflect on your own day-to-day use of disability-related terminology. Does your current behavior reflect respect for the disability community? If not, what needs to change?