Here Are Some Dos And Don'ts Of Disability Language

Andrew Pulrang Contributor ⓘ
Exploring disability practices, policy, politics, and culture.

Follow

Sep 30, 2020, 03:08pm EDT

Listen to article 9 minutes

GETTY

What's the right way to refer to someone in a wheelchair, or a someone who can't see, or see well, or a person who can't hear, or hear well, someone who doesn't speak, who has noticeable trouble understanding things, someone who is sick a lot, or always in pain, or who just seems strange or "off" in some

undefinable way?

The contentious debate never seems to end over what are the right and wrong words and phrases to use to discuss anything to do with disabilities and disabled people. The question resists all attempts to forge broad consensus. Disabled people, their families and friends, their allies and casual acquaintances, and their antagonists can't agree on which words strike the right balance between accuracy, clarity, realism, and positivity. Some of us hammer away at words we find outdated and offensive. Others look around, confused, wondering when the disability words they once learned as progressive suddenly became not only passé, but provocative.

Some try to use language to reshape the entire concept of disability, or redefine it out of existence somehow. Some use words to unify the diverse disability community, while others strive for specificity and ever finer distinctions between different disabilities and communities. Some work to curb the use of obviously insulting terms, while others take pride in the old adage about "sticks and stones." Some hope to use language to lift disabled people up, while others prefer precision and linguistic elegance. We are carefully taught by one wave of credible activists and diversity consultants to say "people with disabilities," only to be told by a later generation of disabled people that this diminishes the experience and meaning of disability, and is in any case awkward and a little condescending.

Is there a way for anyone to navigate disability language clearly, safely, and respectfully?

Obviously, it's impossible to satisfy everyone. But that doesn't mean there are no useful guidelines. Here are a few tips to sort

through the competing schools of thought on disability language, and ride the various waves of popularity and revision that disability language goes through.

1. Recognize obviously insulting terms and stop using or tolerating them.

Idiot, imbecile, moron, and retarded for developmentally disabled or intellectually disabled … deaf and dumb for deaf and non-speaking or non-verbal … crazy, nut, looney, insane for mentally ill or mentally disabled … cripple, gimp for physically disabled or just disabled. These are all terms which should never be used in conversation, and there would be little loss in communication if we did just stop using them except for historical or explanatory purposes (like their appearance in this article). One interesting thing to note is that nearly all of these insulting, offensive terms were once commonly accepted, even clinical descriptions for various disabilities. They weren't viewed as insults at the time. And yet they have always carried the assumed prejudices of those times towards the people those terms represented. So while "moron" and "idiot" in the 19th and early 20th centuries were clinical terms for different "levels" of intellectual disability, the horrifically disdainful and disgusted opinions about intellectually disabled people helped make those words insulting, at the time and especially today.
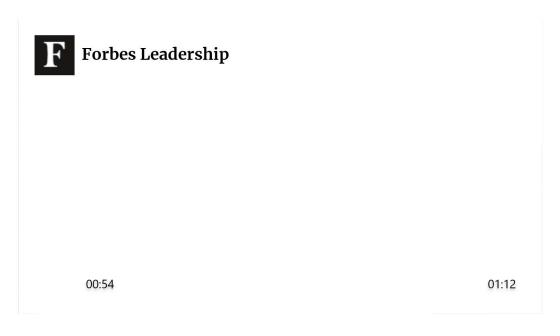
This discussion of banning or rendering certain words taboo inevitably leads to "what-aboutism" aimed at people from marginalized groups "reclaiming" insulting terms for their own internal purposes. In the world of disability, this most notably applies to "cripple" and "crip," which disability activists and participants in disability culture still use to refer to themselves, either ironically or defiantly. It's the kind of situation where if you are part of the group you can use it for yourselves, but from other people's mouths it's an insult. There are a dozen ways to analyze and justify or criticize this intellectually, but it's also just the way things work with people who are marginalized or oppressed. People should be allowed to use terms that mean something to them. And others need to recognize the limits of their power to regulate this practice.

2. Aim to be factual, descriptive, and simple, not condescending, sentimental, or awkward.

One reason why disability language is still so controversial is that there is an almost hidden but quite fundamental clash between what people are trying to do with the words they choose and the phrases they craft to talk about disability. Roughly speaking, some want to use disability terminology to uplift disabled people or somehow repair the image of disability, while others aim for

Cookie Preferences

accuracy, simplicity, and a tone closer to neutrality. One approach encourages a degree of positive emotionalism and persuasion to be built into disability language. The other strives to be more sober, but also elegant and comfortable when spoken and written.

Terms like "differently abled," physically or mentally "challenged," "exceptional," and "special needs" are generally well-intended, at least on the surface. But they are so obviously an effort to be kind, or nice, or positive and cheerleading that the effect on actual disabled people can be sentimental and condescending. It's also an understandable but ultimately wrongheaded effort to promote equality not by elevating disabled people, but in a sense trying to deny the reality of disability as a meaningful concept or experience. As with other marginalized groups, we should know by now that refusing to acknowledge or talk about disability as a real experience doesn't make life better for disabled people.

The main alternative is to be factual and descriptive. We can

name specific types of disability, like cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, amputee, or blind. Or, we can use generic terms like disability or disabled, that at least attempt to encompass all kinds of physical, mental, cognitive, learning, or sensory disabilities. A close reading of "disabled" can always be made to appear negative. But it's widespread use as a generic term for a set of common experiences and social positions make these terms as close to value neutral as can be possible, and therefore useful in the much more achievable goals of accurate identification, equality, and basic respect. Disability and disabled work elegantly simply to describe the shared social identity of all people who have any kind of disability. It's the term to use when specific diagnoses are less important than the barriers we all encounter, the social position we all share, the ableism we all face.

A note here about "Person First vs. Identity First — using "person with a disability" or "disabled person." It's a debate largely within the disability community that is about evenly divided and in transition. "Person first" was supposed to emphasize personhood in contrast with summing up people by their disabilities. It also reflects how some disabled people experience their disabilities, as simply an aspect of themselves, but not something that defines them. But many disabled people increasingly feel that their disabilities are not invaders or merely inconvenient attributes, but something more central to who they are. And looking back, "person first" language seems to have been promoted mostly by non-disabled people for our benefit, not by us. A already noted, the power to define how we talk about ourselves is crucial in deciding which terms and language constructions should and shouldn't be used.

3. Respect disabled people's actual language

preferences.

The most essential guideline for disability language is to use whatever words each individual disabled person prefers. Any well-meaning person's reasons for the choices they believe in are largely secondary compared to respecting what how disabled person wants to be talked about and referred to.

Pay attention to the words adults with disabilities use most often. Some terms, like "special needs," are popular in certain circles, for certain purposes, but almost entirely irrelevant to actual disabled people who are old enough to have developed their own understanding of their disabilities. Very few adults refer to their disabilities as "special needs," which should maybe cause us to rethink using the term for kids and youth with disabilities.

Also take the time to learn what specific disability groups and cultures choose for themselves. Sometimes groups of disabled people make their own consensus choices, such as Little People, and Deaf people who capitalize the "D" in Deaf because they view it as a culture defined by language, like French. And read things written by disabled people, too. Take note of their choices in written language.

Finally, non-disabled people shouldn't lecture disabled people on correct terminology. Almost no term is as insulting as a non-disabled person patiently or aggressively explaining to a disabled person why their own way of talking about themselves is wrong.

The rules and implications of disability language are always evolving. They don't shift and change just to mess up nervous non-disabled people. They change as disabled people's understanding of ourselves and our place in society changes, and

as our aspirations change as well.

In the meantime, the best thing for all of us, disabled or not, is to follow these kinds of basic guidelines, listen to disabled people, and relax a little.

Follow me on [*Twitter*](#) *or* [*LinkedIn*](#)*. Check out my* [*website*](#)*.*

Andrew Pulrang

Follow

I am a freelance writer with lifelong disabilities and 22 years experience as a service provider and executive in nonprofit disability services… **Read More**

Editorial Standards

Reprints & Permissions

Cookie Preferences