



**Mayor's Office for
People with Disabilities**

Disability-Inclusive Terminology Guide

December 2021

Our words matter. How we choose to write and speak about people has the power to help or hinder efforts to create inclusive experiences and a culture respectful of all.

Many commonly used words hold negative connotations that the speaker may not even be aware of. Becoming familiar with these words — and their appropriate alternatives — is important for everyone, but especially those creating content for a public as diverse as New York City.

Everyone has their preferred terms and it is not possible to capture everyone's preferred terms in written language. However, it is important to understand why these words matter and which to avoid when writing about people with disabilities.

Below, you will find a list of words or phrases to avoid, what to use instead, and a short rationale for each.

Offensive Terms and Alternatives

Offensive Term	Appropriate Term	Comments
Retarded / Mentally Retarded	Cognitive, Intellectual, or Developmental Disabilities	Replace the slang word "retarded" with "ridiculous" or something not offensive.
Deaf-Mute / Deaf and Dumb	Deaf	These terms assume that Deaf people do not vocalize.

Offensive Term	Appropriate Term	Comments
Visually Impaired / Hearing Impaired	Blind/Low Vision; Deaf/Hard of Hearing	“Impaired” has a negative connotation.
Handicapped	Accessible or Disabled	Use the appropriate alternatives such as “accessible bathrooms”, “accessible parking spots”, “disabled athletes”, or “athletes with disabilities”.
Stupid / Idiot / Moron / Dumb	Say “that makes no sense” or “that’s ridiculous”. Avoid using these words as an insult.	Did you know that the terms idiot and moron were medical terms and in 1927 the Supreme Court ruled that it was legal to sterilize people who were declared idiots or morons?
Cripple or Gimp	Person with a disability, or people with physical disabilities	Using “cripple” to refer to a person, or as a metaphor, is offensive.
Midget	Little Person, or Dwarf	“Midget” comes from a time when Little People were a source of entertainment. “Dwarf” is a medically acceptable term. “Little Person” is socially acceptable.

Offensive Term	Appropriate Term	Comments
Crazy	Wild, out of this world, bizarre, outrageous	Considered an offensive term because it defames people with mental health disabilities.
Lame	Not cool, uninteresting, dull, disappointing, awkward. Say “poor excuse” instead of “lame excuse”.	Very few people know that the slang word “lame” refers to someone with limited mobility, especially someone who cannot walk. Try saying what you really mean.
Spaz / Spastic	Say “got overly excited” instead of “spazzed out”. Say “that was silly of me” instead of “I’m such a spaz”.	The term “spaz” comes from “spastic”, which is a medical term used to refer to spasms, especially spasms related to high muscle tone, which can be a characteristic of someone with cerebral palsy.
Special	Person with disabilities	This term is patronizing. Everyone can have needs, people with disabilities’ needs are not special. Use “students with disabilities” instead of “special ed students”.

Offensive Term	Appropriate Term	Comments
Differently Abled	Use person-first or identity-first language (see below chart).	Disabled people are proud of their identity and do not want to be referred to with euphemisms. See the table below.
OCD / ADD / ADHD	Use an alternative term that describes the person's behavior unless you are truly referring to a medical diagnosis. For example, instead of describing someone as OCD, say they are "hyper-focused", "picky", or "hard to please".	OCD, ADD, and ADHD are medical terms. It can lead to confusion to use these terms in other contexts and may be hurtful to those who have the diagnosis.
Wheelchair Bound	Person who uses a wheelchair, person with an ambulatory disability	People are not bound to their wheelchairs. They provide independence.
Victim of / Sufferer / Suffers from	Use person-first or identity-first language (see below chart).	These terms assume that the person's experience of disability is necessarily a negative or deficit, and invoke pity, which may promote a feeling of superiority.
Invalid	Person with a disability	Another degrading term. Gives the impression of invalidation.

Offensive Term	Appropriate Term	Comments
Disability metaphors such as blind-sided, fall on deaf ears, paralyzed	Unexpected, ambivalent, frozen	It can be harmful for a disabled person to hear their identity used as a metaphor. for ignorance. Say what you mean instead of using expressions like blind-sided.

Person-First and Identity-First Language

Person-first language puts the person first such as “person with a disability”. Identity-first language places the disability first such as “disabled person”. Whenever it is possible, ask each person how they identify and remember their preference. When that is not possible, the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities recommends using “person-first language”.

Below is a list of disability types and their corresponding person-first and identity-first terminologies.

Disability Type	Person-First Language	Identity-First Language
Mobility	Person with mobility disabilities, person with physical disabilities. Person who uses a wheelchair	Disabled person, wheelchair user
Hearing	Person who is Deaf, person who is hard of hearing	Deaf person
Vision	Person who is blind, person who has low vision	Blind person

Disability Type	Person-First Language	Identity-First Language
Mental Health	Person who is living with or experiencing a mental health disability or mental illness. Or, specify the illness or condition: Person who is experiencing psychosis, or person who is living with bipolar disorder.	Identity-first language is usually not favored in this context.
Cognitive / Intellectual / Developmental	Person with cognitive, intellectual, or developmental disabilities	Identity-first language is not favored in this context
Neurodiversity	Person who is neurodivergent. Or refer to specific diagnosis: Person with autism or with autism spectrum disorder.	Neurodivergent individual, ASD individual

Additional Resources for Language

[Disability Language Style Guide](#)

[Disability Writing and Journalism Guidelines](#)

[Conscious Style Guide](#)