

Writing For and About People with Disabilities

When writing about people with disabilities, you are in a unique position to shape the public image of people with disabilities. The words and images you use can create either a straightforward, positive view of people with disabilities or an insensitive portrayal that reinforces common myths and is a form of discrimination. The following set of guidelines can help you make better choices in terms of language and portrayal. These guidelines explain preferred terminology and suggest appropriate ways to describe people with disabilities. Please use these guidelines when writing about people with disabilities.

- **Do not focus on disability**

Focus on the person, not the disability. Avoid tear-jerking human-interest stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments, or severe injury. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life for those same individuals, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities, and discrimination.

- **Do not use generic labels**

Avoid generic labels for disability groups, such as "the retarded" or "the deaf." Emphasize people not labels. Say, people with intellectual disability or people who are deaf.

- **Do not portray people with disabilities as superhuman**

Avoid portraying people with disabilities as superhuman. Even though the public may admire super-achievers, portraying people with disabilities as superstars raises false expectations that all people with disabilities should achieve this level.

- **Do not sensationalize a disability**

Do not sensationalize the disability by saying afflicted with, crippled with, suffers from, victim of, and so on. Instead, say person who has multiple sclerosis or man who had polio.

- **Put people first**

Put people first, not their disability. Say, a man who is blind, children who are deaf, people with disabilities. This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation.

- **Emphasize abilities**

Emphasize a person's abilities, not their limitations. For example: she uses a wheelchair, he walks with crutches. Never say confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound, or crippled. Similarly, do not use emotional descriptors such as unfortunate, pitiful, and so forth. Most disability groups strongly object to using euphemisms to describe disabilities. Terms such as handicapable, mentally different, physically inconvenienced, and physically challenged are considered condescending. They reinforce the idea that disabilities cannot be dealt with up front.

- **Show people with disabilities as active**

Show people with disabilities as active members of society. Portraying persons with disabilities interacting with non-disabled people in social and work environments helps break down barriers and open lines of communication.