



FACT SHEET

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Revised April 2004

WRITING ABOUT DISABLED PEOPLE

Language is very important but use of language varies from decade to decade. The language we use is the language used by the Disabled People's movement; it is not language as defined by GLAD. You will find wide variation of usage, even amongst disabled people. But the language we are saying should NOT be used is mainly used by government departments, local authorities, organisations FOR disabled people and most non-disabled people.

Disabled people try to define disability in terms of the social model and within this language is crucial. An understanding of the social model will lead to greater understanding of the above language

The Social Model of Disability is used by the majority of organisations OF disabled people. We believe that it is society's physical, sensory, attitudinal, legal and behavioural barriers which make us disabled, it is not our particular medical conditions or impairments. Society has also chosen language which is not what those of us in the Disabled People's Movement would generally use.

The guidelines in this factsheet will help you to make better choices in terms of language and portrayal of disabled people.

General guidelines

Do not focus on impairments/conditions unless it is crucial to the document. Try not to write tear-jerking stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injuries. It is far better to focus on the issues or barriers which affect the quality of life of disabled people such as accessible transport, accessible housing, affordable healthcare, employment opportunities and discrimination.

Do not portray successful disabled people as superhuman. The public may like stories about super-achievers and wheelchair users scaling mountain tops for example, but portraying disabled people in this way raises the false expectation that all disabled people should achieve this level.

Do not sensationalise a disabled person by using phrases like 'afflicted with', 'suffers from', 'victim of', 'crippled with' and so on. Use phrases such as 'person who has arthritis' or 'woman who has cystic fibrosis' instead.

Do not use generic labels for groups of disabled people, such as 'the deaf', 'the blind' or 'the disabled'. Try to emphasise the person not the impairment and say things like 'person who is deaf', 'person who is blind' and 'disabled person' instead.

Try to focus on the individual and not on their particular impairment or condition. Say things like 'children who are blind' rather than 'blind children' or 'woman with epilepsy' rather than 'epileptic woman'.

Do not use emotional descriptions such as 'unfortunate', 'pitiful', 'mad', 'psycho', 'stupid', 'mental', 'handicapped' etc. These are offensive.

Do not use euphemisms to describe disabled people. Phrases such as 'mentally incompetent', 'mentally deficient', 'physically incapacitated' and 'visually challenged' are considered to be condescending by disabled people.

Never refer to a disabled person as a patient unless you are discussing their relationship with their doctor.

The following list of words and phrases are preferred words when writing about disabled people.

Disabled people	Not	The disabled
		The handicapped
		People with disabilities
Non-disabled person	Not	Normal
		Able-bodied
		Healthy
Person with learning difficulties	Not	Mentally handicapped
		Retarded
		Thick / Stupid
		Person with learning disabilities

Blind person	Not	The blind
Visually impaired person		
Partially sighted person		
Deaf person	Not	The deaf
The Deaf community		Deaf and dumb
Hard of hearing, partially deaf		
Hearing impaired		
Person with epilepsy	Not	Epileptic
Mental health system user/mental health system survivor	Not	Mentally ill
		Mad
		Dangerous schizophrenic
Person with mental health impairment		Mentally handicapped
Wheelchair user	Not	Wheelchair bound
		The wheelchair
Physically disabled person	Not	Cripple
Person with physical impairment		
Woman/man with sickle cell	Not	Sickle cell sufferer
HIV positive	Not	AIDS carrier
Person living with HIV		

Neurodiverse person	Not	Stupid	Accessible parking space	Not	Disabled parking space
Person with arthritis	Not	Crippled with arthritis	Blue Badge holders parking space		
		Arthritic			
Person with Cerebral Palsy	Not	Spastic	Accessible toilets	Not	Disabled toilets
Person with dyslexia	Not	Wordblind	Accessible entrance	Not	Disabled entrance
Dyslexic person		Can't spell	Level/ramped entrance		
		Clumsy			
Person with dyspraxia			Parking permits for disabled peoples' section	Not	Disabled parking permits section
Person with a specific learning difficulty			Blue Badge permits		
Person with a disfigurement	Not	Disfigured person	Accessible housing	Not	Disabled housing
		Facially abnormal	Person with Down's syndrome	Not	Mongol
		Facially deformed			Spastic
		Burns victim	Personal assistant	Not	Carer
Severe disfigurement	Not	Gross disfigurement			
		Horrendous scarring			
		Horrific disfigurement			
Unaware	Not	Blind to the truth			
Does not understand the information		Stupid			
		Deaf to reason			
Does not listen					

The Social Model of Disability

GLAD publishes a document called **“Reclaiming the Social Model of Disability – Conference Report”** which is free with a 27p SAE.

For further examples of good writing about disabled people, see these GLAD publications:

London Disability News – GLAD's regular monthly magazine

Boadicea – A bi-monthly national disabled women's magazine

Count Us In Newsletter – A quarterly newsletter for Black and Minority Ethnic disabled people

Common Agenda Newsletter – A quarterly news letter for mental health system user/survivors

Useful Sources of Further Information

The following organisations publish CD-Roms which contain easily recognised illustrations for use in word and picture format documents. CHANGE produces the 'CHANGE Picture Bank' and People First produce 'Access First'.

Unity Business Centre
Units 19 & 20
26 Roundhay Road
Leeds
LS7 1AB

Telephone: 0113 243 0202

Fax: 0113 243 0220

Textphone: 0113 243 2225

E-mail:

changepeople@btconnect.com

Website: www.changepeople.co.uk

People First
1st Floor
299 Kentish Town Road
London NW5 2TJ

Telephone: 020 7485 6660

Website: www.peoplefirstltd.com

Plain English Campaign

This website gives lots of useful tips. The one to look at is 'How to write in plain English', designed as a starting point for anyone interested in learning the tricks of clear writing.

www.plainenglish.co.uk