

An introduction to inclusive language

Language is an incredibly powerful tool, and it is linked to the creation or perpetration of mind-sets. Language can be used to create a sense of empowerment, pride, identity and purpose. Conversely, improper use can have a devastating impact, cause individual harm and/or perpetuate oppression on a larger scale - even when used with best intentions.

A general piece of advice to follow is to **focus on the individual and not the impairment, do not overemphasise any illnesses or consider it as the central feature of an individual's life.** Talk about an individual/group as living *with* disability/health conditions or who *has/have* epilepsy – and only when it is relevant! **Do not overemphasise that people are either victims of pity, or similarly, inspirational** just for getting through the day or living their lives – this can be patronising and offensive. Avoid passive, victim words (e.g. don't say 'suffering from', or 'bound to their wheelchair'). Use language that respects disabled people as active individuals with control over their own lives.

Similarly, focus on the **positive rather than the negative**: for example bathrooms are now described as accessible, rather than disabled or handicapped – this incorporates the requirements of a range of people who may have access needs.

The below table provides some general good practice related to language, with some words being more problematic than others. Despite the guidance in this table, it is important to remember a golden rule: **Do not tell people how to label themselves. Self-identification trumps all.** Someone may have impairment, but still not identify as a person with disability.

Be careful about overgeneralizing your students' experiences. It is natural to assume that experiences you have had (e.g. flying on an airplane) are shared by others, but when that is not the case, it can marginalize students whose experiences differ. **Use language to acknowledge different lived experiences**: "For those of you who have been on an airplane. . ."

When working with individuals ask people what language they would prefer, and talk directly to a disabled person, even if they have an interpreter or companion with them, use a normal tone of voice and don't finish a sentence for the other person. Do be aware of the phrases you are using, but don't be so afraid of saying the wrong thing that you don't say anything at all (e.g. people who use wheelchairs 'go for walks' and people with visual impairments may be very pleased – or not – 'to see you'). **Relax, be willing to communicate, and listen.**

Please turn over for a list of suggested language. . . .



Avoid	Use
(the) handicapped, (the) disabled	disabled (people); people living with disability
afflicted by, suffers from, victim of	has [name of condition or impairment]
confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	wheelchair user
mentally handicapped, mentally defective, retarded, subnormal	with a learning disability (singular) with learning disabilities (plural)
able-bodied	non-disabled; person without disability
mental patient, insane, mad	person with a mental health condition
deaf and dumb; deaf mute	deaf, user of British Sign Language (BSL), person with a hearing impairment
the blind	people with visual impairments; blind people; blind and partially sighted people
an epileptic, diabetic, depressive, and so on	person with epilepsy, diabetes, depression or someone who has epilepsy, diabetes, depression
fits, spells, attacks	seizures

Additional Notes: