Terminology: What's in a word?

Language matters. It is not simply a matter of 'political correctness'; this is a real issue that affects people's lives.

Why is language important?

Historically, people with disabilities have been the subject of discriminatory and offensive terms that, thankfully, are no longer acceptable. However, language is always evolving and it is essential that the words we use to describe disability and individuals with disabilities are appropriate, respectful, inclusive and contextual. Some words, such as 'Crip' and 'Crippled' may still be the chosen words by people with disabilities themselves as a way of reclaiming and repurposing the power of those terms. This doesn't mean it's okay for those without disabilities to use those words, even if it is repeating a quote from someone else.

Using the right terminology in internal and external communications, whether that's in reports, briefings, articles or social media, can empower and enfranchise people with disabilities; but equally using outdated and inappropriate terms will reinforce prejudice and discrimination.

Getting the language right should go hand in hand with a genuine change in attitudes and practice. We know this doesn't happen overnight. But if we are using the right language, along with other changes in approach outlined in this toolkit, a cultural shift should eventually happen.

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👍 Where it worked: A collective voice for change

The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) and Kids as Self Advocates (KASA) teamed up to produce a very helpful guide: **"Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up!"**. Using their collective voice to challenge how people with disabilities are talked about, they have helped influence a generation of journalists in the USA, with many institutes adopting more positive language and promoting good practice. For example, the National Centre on Disability and Journalism, headquartered at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, has developed an online **Disability Language Style Guide**.

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Terminology dos and don'ts

The table below lists some terminology dos and don'ts when writing about people with disabilities. Please note this is not an exhaustive list.

Disability	Outdated language	Respectful language
Blind or Visual impairment	Dumb, Invalid	Blind/Visually impaired, Person who is blind/visually impaired
Deaf or Hearing impairment	Invalid, Deaf-and-Dumb, Deaf-Mute	Deaf or Hard of hearing, Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
Speech/Communication disability	Dumb, "One who talks bad"	Person with a speech/communication disability
Learning/Cognitive disability	Retard, Mentally retarded, Slow, Brain-damaged, 'Special ed'	Learning disability, Cognitive disability, Cognitively/Developmentally disabled, Person with a learning or cognitive disability, Person/someone who is neurodiverse
Long-term condition	Long-term health condition	Person who has a long-term condition, as not all long-term conditions relate to health, e.g. autism
Mental health disability	Hyper-sensitive, Psycho, Crazy, Insane, Wacko, Nuts	Person with a psychiatric disability, Person with a mental health disability
Mobility/Physical disability	Handicapped, Physically challenged, Special, Deformed, Cripple, Gimp, Spastic, Spaz, Wheelchair-bound, Lame	Wheelchair user, Physically disabled, Person with a mobility or physical disability
Emotional disability	Emotionally disturbed	Emotionally disabled, Person with an emotional disability
Short stature, Little person	Dwarf, Midget	Someone of short stature, Little person
Health conditions	Victim, Someone 'stricken with' a disability eg 'someone stricken with cancer' or 'an AIDS victim'	Survivor, Someone 'living with' a specific disability eg 'someone living with cancer or AIDS'

Remember: What is 'okay' for some people is not 'okay' for others. If you don't know what to say… Just Ask!