



*People First  
Language*

# Style Guide

**A reference for  
media professionals and  
anyone who uses words**



**Belmont County  
People First**



*disability and see the potential within  
every person.*

## What is People First Language?

“People First” Language (also referred to as “Person First”) is an accurate way of referring to a person with a disability in spoken or written word.

This style guide offers an alphabetical list of standard terms that focus on the person instead of the disability.

This is not a complete list, but is a general representation of terms that people with disabilities commonly find respectable.

## Why People First Language?

Words and how they are used shape attitudes.

Incorporating People First Language into the written and spoken word demonstrates that people are unique and their abilities or disabilities are part of who they are, not a definition of who they are.

People First Language is sensitive and **accurate** and helps break down community barriers. It also fosters mutual respect and open lines of communication and acceptance.

## { **Appropriate Terminology**

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### **A**

**ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)** involves learning and behavioral problems that do not have any serious underlying physical or mental causes and is characterized especially by difficulty in sustaining attention, impulsive behavior, and excessive activity.

- **DO USE:** child with ADHD
- **DON'T USE:** hyperactive

**Autism** is a mental disability originating in infancy that may be characterized by absorption in self-centered subjective mental activity, especially when accompanied by marked withdrawal from reality, inability to interact socially, repetitive behavior, and language dysfunction.

- **DO USE :** child with autism, child who has autism, person living with autism
- **DON'T USE:** autistic

### **B**

**Blindness** occurs when a person has loss of vision for ordinary life purposes.

- **DO USE:** person who is visually impaired, person with visual impairments, boy who is blind
- **DON'T USE:** blind, the blind, blind person

**Brain injury** is a long-term or temporary disruption in brain function resulting from injury to the brain. Difficulties with cognitive, physical, emotional, and/or social functioning may occur.

- **DO USE:** person who has a brain injury, woman who has sustained a brain injury, or boy with an acquired brain injury
- **DON'T USE:** brain damaged, suffers from brain damage, victim of brain damage

### **D**

**Deafness** is a profound hearing loss that results in development of language skills - often American Sign Language - that are different from those developed by individuals who have hearing.

- **DO USE:** (ask the person who is being written or talked about)
- **DON'T USE:** (ask the person who is being written or talked about)

**Developmental disability** is a mental or physical disability that occurs at birth or in infancy where one or more major life activities is limited indefinitely.

- **DO USE:** individual with: a disability, autism, epilepsy, a brain injury, etc.
- **DON'T USE:** retarded, disabled, handicapped, autistic, epileptic, brain damaged

**Disability** is a general term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability, for example, to walk, lift, hear, or learn, and may be physical, sensory, or mental.

- **DO USE:** person with a disability
- **DON'T USE:** handicapped, the mentally or physically disabled, special, retarded, mental retardation

**Down syndrome** describes a chromosomal irregularity that results in a delay in physical, intellectual and language development.

- **DO USE:** person with Down syndrome
- **DON'T USE:** Mongol, Mongoloid, Down's baby

## L

**Learning disability** is anything permanent that affects the way a person takes in, retains and expresses information.

- **DO USE:** child with a learning disability, child who has a learning disability
- **DON'T USE:** slow, slow learner, retarded

## M

**Mental retardation** *refers to some degree of intellectual delay, which can range from mild to profound depending on the cause. Individuals may live completely or partially independent with support.*

**This term is no longer accepted and SHOULD NOT BE USED.**

**DON'T USE:** retarded, slow, the retarded, abnormal

## { P

**Post-polio syndrome** is a condition that affects persons who have had poliomyelitis (polio) long after recovery from the disease.

- **DO USE:** person with post-polio syndrome
- **DON'T USE:** polio victim

**Psychiatric disability** - psychotic, schizophrenic, neurotic, and other specific terms should be used **only** in proper clinical context and should be checked carefully for medical and legal accuracy.

- **DO USE:** psychiatric disabilities, psychiatric illness, emotional disorders, mental disorders
- **DON'T USE:** crazy, maniac, lunatic, demented, schizo, psycho

## S

**Seizure** is an involuntary muscular contraction or a brief impairment or loss of consciousness resulting from something neurological like epilepsy, or from brain injury.

- **DO USE:** person who has a seizure disorder, person who had a seizure
- **DON'T USE:** fit, spastic, epileptic

**Small/short stature** describes people under 4'10" tall. Groups who focus on this issue are divided between using "little people" and "dwarfs", because some are offended by those terms and some are not.

- **DO USE:** ask the person who is being written or talked about
- **DON'T USE:** midget

**Speech disorder** is when a person has limited or difficult speech patterns.

- **DO USE:** person who has a speech disorder
- **DON'T USE:** mute, dumb

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**Spinal cord injury** occurs when there has been permanent damage to the spinal cord. Quadriplegia is a substantial or significant loss of function in all four extremities. Paraplegia refers to substantial or significant loss of function in the lower part of the body only.

- **DO USE:** person with a spinal cord injury, person who has quadriplegia or paraplegia
- **DON'T USE:** quadriplegic, paraplegic

**Stroke** is caused by interruption of blood to the brain. Hemiplegia (paralysis of one side) may result.

- **DO USE:** person who had a stroke
- **DON'T USE:** stroke victim



## Removal of the term 'mental retardation'

In 2009, new laws in Ohio removed the term “mental retardation” from official references in the names and business workings of public agencies. Ohio was the 45th state to officially remove the term that many people with disabilities find offensive.

The change had long been advocated for in Ohio by individuals with disabilities and their families. Ohio's legislators passed Senate Bill 79 in July 2009 and its companion house bill in June 2009 supporting the name change. Ohio Governor Strickland signed the bill into law effective October 2009.

Advocates are now pushing to change public use of the term, championing the phrase:

***“Respect is the new R word!”***

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## Tips for Incorporating People First Language

**Refer to the Quick Guide  
on the back page of this Style Guide  
for an overview of common words  
to use and avoid.**

Different groups object to different phrases for varying reasons. Even among people with disabilities and their families, different terms are used and accepted.

It is best to ask the person you are speaking or writing about which words or phrases are acceptable to them personally.

When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is preferable to emphasize abilities rather than limitations, focusing on a person's accomplishments, creative talents or skills.

It is not preferable to avoid mentioning a person's disability or describing the impact it has had on the person's life. It is preferable to refer to the person and the disability he or she happens to have respectfully and accurately.

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## Quick Reference Guide

### **DO USE**

Congenital disability ----- birth defect  
 uses a wheelchair ----- wheelchair bound  
 has a disability ----- handicapped  
 Deaf, hard of hearing ----- hearing impaired  
 Down syndrome ----- Mongoloid, Downs  
 Person of small (or short) stature ----- Dwarf, midget  
 People with disabilities ----- Retarded, crippled,  
 afflicted  
 Person with epilepsy ----- Epileptic  
 Person with disabilities ----- Client, consumer  
 Brain injury ----- Brain Damaged  
 Accessible parking ----- Handicapped  
 parking  
 Typical, typically developing ----- Normal, healthy  
 Communicates with her eyes/device ----- Non-verbal  
 Physical disability ----- Victim, afflicted,  
 suffers from

### **DON'T USE**

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