

What We Say Matters!

Disability Inclusive Language Choices: Person-First & Identity-First Language

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This article provides perspectives on both person-first language and identity-first language to empower you to make informed and inclusive language choices. Within the disability community or the disabled community, there is currently a robust landscape related to language. This article emphasizes taking in available information so that you can refer to people with disability or disabled people inclusively. If you are unsure which language is best, always ask the person.

Person-First Language

Historically, person-first language has been at the forefront of what would be deemed the most appropriate language to use in the context of speaking or writing about a person with a disability. Person-first language is the use of language which puts a person before a diagnosis, describing what a person "has" rather than asserting what a person "is." It is intended to avoid marginalization or dehumanization either consciously or subconsciously when talking about or referencing people with a chronic illness or disability. It is often seen as a type of disability etiquette. However, person-first language may also apply to any group that would otherwise be defined, categorized or described by a label. Some categories are age, race, gender and socioeconomic status. Here are some examples of person first language: "a person with a disability," "a person with diabetes," a "person who uses a wheelchair" and "a person who is homeless." The intention of person-first language is to avoid using labels and to see the person as a person first and their attribute(s) second.

Identity-First Language

As noted in the Bazelon Center's Disability Justice Lesson Plan, identity-first language came about within the self-advocacy movements of Deaf people, Blind people and Autistic people when they decided to create strong, unified cultures about shared experiences. The message that is sent by identifying as a disabled person is the powerful definition and understanding that there is nothing wrong with being disabled. In today's culture there are many disabled people who prefer identity-first language for those very reasons. (2) Here are a few examples of identity-first language: "I am a disabled person," "I am disabled," "I am a woman" and "I am autistic." For advocates of identity-first language, talking about being a "disabled person" is fundamentally empowering because it acknowledges that their disability is vital to their position in the world and who they are. (1)

Both person-first and identity-first language, at their root, are trying to create the same awareness and resolve the same problem: to give the disabled community or the community of persons with disability respect, access, autonomy, equity, self-determination, opportunity, inclusion and interdependence. We must continue to empower the disabled community to define themselves. One of the ways we do that is by focusing on inclusive language and by simply asking how people would like to be addressed. As Emily Ladau suggests:

"The first time you engage with a disabled person, don't just blurt out something like, 'What do people like you want to be called?' or 'What should I call you?' If it comes up naturally in conversation and you're unsure, just say, 'Do you prefer to be called 'disabled,' 'person with a disability' or something else?'" (2)

What the Community is Saying

There are many authors, bloggers and leaders who live the experience of disability whose work may bring deeper clarity to many of the existing narratives around disability and language today.

New Mobility Magazine recently published an article authored by Lawrence Carter Long. He is the current Director of Communications for the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF) and creator of the hashtag “SayTheWord.” In his article “#SayTheWordDisabled,” he writes:

“Once upon a time, disability was just a diagnosis. Thankfully, through the years, the word has evolved to encompass much more: community, identity, constituency, history and culture, to name a few. In 2019, anyone who thinks of disability solely as a medical issue is behind the times – by a few decades even. So why are we still debating the words used to describe disability?” (3)

Emily Ladau @emily_ladau, creator of a recent hashtag “DisabledOutLoud,” shares a poignant twitter feed where those who identify as disabled share their prideful thoughts, language and narratives about being disabled.

Barbara King writes in her article “‘Disabled’: Just #SayTheWord”: “To be seen for who we are in our own right, and for what we experience, is, I think, a desire common to everyone.”

References

(1) Brown, L.X.T., “Module Four: Working Against Ableism in Our Own Communities” Bazelon Center and Amplifier.org Disability Justice Lesson Plan. May, 2019. 23 September, 2019. <http://bit.ly/disabilityjusticeguide>

(2) Thorpe, J. R. (2017, August 9). This Is How To Talk About Disability, According To Disabled People. Retrieved from <https://www.bustle.com/p/what-is-identity-first-language-should-you-use-it-74901>

(3) Sherer, T. (2019, September 3). Big Ideas in Culture. Retrieved from <http://www.newmobility.com/2019/09/big-ideas-in-culture/>

Resources

[New Mobility: Big Ideas in Culture by Teal Sherer \(9/19\)](#)

[NPR: ‘Disabled’: Just #SayTheWord by Barbara J. King \(2/25/16\)](#)

[Huffington Post: It’s Perfectly OK to Call a Disabled Person ‘Disabled’, and Here’s Why by Brittany Wong \(6/14/19\)](#)

[People First Language and More](#)

[Should You Use Person-First or Identity-First Language? By Rachel Kassenbrock \(8/11/15\)](#)

[Bustle.com What is Identity-First Language, & Should You Use it? By JR Thorpe \(8/9/17\)](#)

[Communicating With and About People with Disabilities](#)

[Guidelines for Writing about People with Disabilities](#)



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