

Unhandicapping Our Language

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Language reflects and reinforces our perceptions and misperceptions of others. All too frequently the terms used for people with disabilities perpetuate stereotypes and false ideas. This guide is offered as one means to “unhandicap” our language and thinking. It is selective, not exhaustive. It is intended as a suggestion, not censorship.

Objectionable

Preferable

(the) disabled	Sees people only in terms of their disabilities	People with disabilities
(the) Mentally retarded	Robs us of individuality by lumping people into one undifferentiated category	Person with mental retardation
(the) Deaf (the) Blind, etc.	Humanizing nouns emphasize the person	deaf citizens blind people

The debate over the use of handicap versus disabled has not been settled. We do not select a preference

abnormal	Sees people with disabilities as less human than others	none is needed
(birth) defected defective	Describes and object, dehumanizes a person	congenital disability

Mrs. Kelly is an arthritic patient	Sees someone as an object of medical care	Mrs. Kelly has arthritis
Bill Cullen was: affected with, stricken with, or suffers from polio	Connotes helplessness, dependency, and defeat. Denies other aspects of person	Bill Cullen had polio

Victim FDR was a polio victim	Connotes pitiful helplessness	state the facts FDR had polio
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Invalid	(from the same root as VALid) Inaccurate, most people with disabilities are not sickly	none is needed
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Deaf and dumb Dummy Deaf-mute	Implies mental incapacitation occurs with hearing loss and/or speech impairment	deaf person who is hard of hearing speech impaired
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Objectable		Preferable
sightless, four eyes, blind as a bat	inaccurate, demeaning	blind partially sighted vision impaired
cripple crippled crip	No epithet is more offensive to people with physical disabilities (from old English “to creep”) A second meaning of this adjective is “inferior”	FDR had a physical disability (or) FDR had polio
confined to a wheelchair wheelchair-bound wheel-chaired	creates a false impression: wheelchairs liberate, not confine or bind; they are mobility tools from which people transfer to sleep, sit in chairs, drive car, etc.	wheelchair user uses a wheelchair wheelchair using
Handel was epileptic Renoir was arthritic Geri Jewell is cerebral palsied	These usage’s see people as their disabilities Inaccurate reference; a person is not a condition	Handel had epilepsy Renoir had Arthritis Geri Jewell has cerebral palsy
Midget, dwarf	Mythical, denies reality. Infantizing, patronizing The debate over use of short-statured people verses little people has not been settled.	Short-statured person
Deformed Misshapen Hunchbacked	Connotes repulsive oddity Demeaning	has a physical disability has a spinal curvature
Lame, paralytic, gimp, gimpy, withered	Demeaning	walks with a cane, uses crutches. Senator Dole has a disabled hand
Monster, vegetable, creature, freak	Robs people with severe disabilities of their humanity	the child has multiple or severe disabilities
Mentally ill, crazy, insane, psycho, nut, maniac, former mental patient	Outdated and stigmatizing	mental disability, behavior disorder, emotional disability, mentally restored
Retard, slow, simple-minded, idiot, mongoloid	Demeaning	people with mental retardation
Spastic, spazz, has fits	Demeaning	has seizures, has cerebral palsy, has epilepsy
“Special”	Distancing and inappropriate, patronizing Describes that which is different about any person	none is needed
Physically challenged handi-capable inconvenienced differently-abled	Euphemisms avoid reality and rob people of dignity	A person has a physical, sensory or mental disability