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Language & Accessibility

*This guide refers to best practices recognised by **Arts Access Australia**[i]
on the language used to refer to people with disability, as well as the
definition and examples of ableist language.*

What is disability?

'People with disability' means anyone with sensory or physical
impairments, hidden impairments, learning disabilities or mental health
conditions.

The Social Model of Disability makes a distinction between
impairments and disability. 'Disability' refers to barriers in the
environment, rather than an individual's medical condition.

In the Social Model context, someone is disabled by barriers or
discrimination, not by impairment. The phrase 'people with disability'
puts the person first.

Examples of recommended terms

- Person with/out disability
- Wheelchair user
- Blind / vision impaired person
- Person with low vision
- Deaf person / Auslan user
- Learning disability/difficulty
- Person of small stature
- Mental health issues / condition
- Mental health service user
- Mental health survivor

Examples of terms that are not recommended

- Person with a disability
- Differently abled / 'the' disabled
- Handicapped
- Someone who can't / suffers from
- Non-disabled / able bodied / normal
- Wheelchair bound / confined to
- 'The' blind / 'the' deaf
- Dumb
- Retarded / retard
- Special needs
- Midget / dwarf
- Mental health problems
- Mental
- 'The' mentally ill

Ableism

The term 'ableism' refers to discrimination or prejudice against people with disability. It includes assumptions, stereotypes, attitudes and practices, physical barriers in the environment, or larger scale oppression – as well as language.

Intent vs. impact

When someone is offended by language, we tend to focus on the intent of the speaker. For example, if someone says the wrong thing we might defend them by saying that they didn't mean to cause offence. However, studies[ii] show that unintentional harms are equally damaging, so it's crucial to be mindful of the language we use.

Examples[iii] of ableist language

- Crazy/Insane/Nuts: Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.
- Cretin/Moron(ic)/Stupid: Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.
- Cripple/Crippled (by): Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.
- Idiot(ic): Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.
- Lame: Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.
- Retard(ed)/[anything]-tard: Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.
- Spaz: Refers to people with cerebral palsy or neurological disabilities.

Examples of terms that you might mean instead

- Bad
- Boring
- Confusing
- Dense
- Disgusting
- Gross
- Horrible
- Ignorant
- Inane
- Incomprehensible
- Insipid
- Jerk
- Mean
- Nonsense
- Rude
- Shameful

[i] www.artsaccessaustralia.org/resources/advice-sheets/63-aaa-advice-on-disability-language

[ii] Ames, D.L., & Fiske, S.T. (2013). Intentional harms are worse, even when they're not. Psychological Science, 24, 1755-1762.

[iii] www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html

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