



a way with words

Guidelines for the
portrayal of people
with a disability



Queensland Government
Disability Services Queensland



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why have guidelines?

The power of words and images to reflect and shape community perceptions of people with a disability is widely acknowledged.

This moulding of perceptions and attitudes through language is an ongoing and dynamic process. It represents an important responsibility and a significant challenge to all involved - particularly those who engage in public communications as a part of their professional lives.

The guidelines presented in *A Way With Words* are designed to raise awareness of language based issues specific to the portrayal of people with a disability.

They also assist in the development of positive and appropriate communications with and regarding the disability sector.

Topics covered include

- ▶ using appropriate descriptive language
- ▶ avoiding common stereotypes
- ▶ reporting on, communicating with and interviewing people with a disability

The way in which we speak and write about people with a disability is more than a cosmetic issue. Language is a **powerful** tool which can be used to change stereotypes and attitudes.



Appropriate language choices can bring about a shift in emphasis. For example, using *person with a disability* instead of the inappropriate *disabled person* changes the focus of the expression from the disability itself to the individual concerned.

Language choices can bring about a change in emphasis

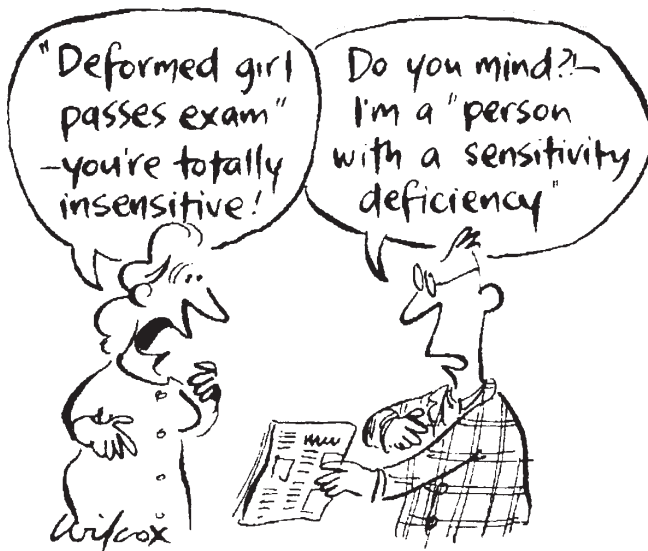
- ▶ **from** the individual(s) as being a part of society's fringe **to** their being an integral part of the community
- ▶ **from** an unreal expectation of people with heroic effort overcoming monumental difficulties **to** a realistic ongoing response to life's daily problems
- ▶ **from** excessive emotional coverage **to** normal human empathy and interest
- ▶ **from** stereotyping **to** individualising
- ▶ **from** a focus on the trauma of personal suffering **to** the adequacy of the community's response
- ▶ **from** milking the emotive content of disability **to** the provision of relevant information

The time for portraying the experience of people with a disability as sensational and abnormal is over.

general principles

People with a disability are and should be portrayed as part of the community. They are individuals first, with the same variety of desires, interests, problems talents, and faults as any other member of the community.

Through the use of appropriate language emphasis can be placed on this individuality, rather than on the disability that a person happens to have.





About disability

In writing about disability issues or portraying people with a disability on television or in print, the following general points need to be borne in mind as underlying principles of fair and accurate reporting.

- ▶ see people with a disability as equals and as part of the diversity of humanity
- ▶ focus on what people can do
- ▶ recognise individuality
- ▶ respect rights

There are thousands of conditions which may lead to a permanent, intermittent or temporary disability.

It is not important to know the details of different disabilities. It is important however, to bear the following points in mind.

- ▶ Disabilities affect different people in different ways depending on age, cause, attitude, family background, opportunity, adjustment to physical, sensory and other limitations and other factors

You may find that one person with quadriplegia will be training for the Paralympics, another studying at university, another becoming a disability advocate, yet another may be more interested in the racing form guide.



general principles (continued)

Assumptions should never be made on the basis of limited general information about any particular disability.

- ▶ Every person with a disability is an individual and no one should be expected to display a specific range of personality characteristics. For example, people with Down Syndrome are routinely described as ‘loving’.

Such stereotyping denies the person with the disability the right to express their individual personality.

- ▶ Many people have hidden or invisible disabilities such as a psychiatric or learning disability or some degree of vision impairment. Do not make judgements on the basis of what is apparent.
- ▶ People with disabilities are people first, with feelings, emotions, desires, aspirations, frustration and needs just like anyone else. For many people, having a disability is an unavoidable fact of life, not something to be dramatised, feared, ridiculed or denigrated.

People with a disability have rarely been depicted in literature, films or photographs as average or ordinary people.

words matter

Dramatic images have included those of pitiable, burdensome creatures or helpless victims. In the past, people with certain kinds of disabilities have been demonised while others were sanctified. Historically, people with a disability have been stigmatised, marginalised and feared. All such inappropriate images continue to arouse feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt and discomfort.

More recent stereotypes have included “very special” inspirational stories of superhuman over-achievers, the “supercrips” who abseil down cliff faces in wheelchairs.

Or the “saintly martyrs” who selflessly endure decades of unspeakable sufferings. A person with an intellectual disability may be depicted as the eternal child, innocent and free of adult desires.





words matter (continued)

Language is critical in shaping and reflecting our thoughts, beliefs, feelings and concepts.

Some words by their very nature degrade and diminish people with a disability. The language customarily used to denote disabling conditions has been condemnatory, judgemental or couched in medical jargon.

Perhaps the most dangerous misuse of language in describing people with a disability has been to dehumanise the individual by labelling the person as the disability - a quad, a spastic, etc.

Always try to

- ▶ avoid stereotypical or stigmatising depictions of people with a disability
- ▶ avoid phrases and words that demean individuals with a disability
- ▶ promote the “people first” concept
- ▶ portray people with a disability in the same multi-dimensional fashion as others

In the general community, as well as in the disability community, there is considerable controversy about how people with a disability should be described.

language and disability



Words which should not be used include invalid, unfit, disabled, infirm, incapacitated, defective, retarded, or those that start with in, dis, un or de, all of which imply a lack of something or some kind of inferiority. What is absent or lacking in an individual is emphasised rather than their capabilities.


Even words describing a person's medical condition such as epilepsy, polio, paraplegia, blindness, schizophrenia, or autism suggest sickness and imperfection.

Such words focus attention on the condition and not on the person as an individual.

The language reinforces negative assumptions and stereotypes.

Words change in meaning or use. Take for example, cripple (from the Old English crypel, meaning one who can only creep). This word was once in common and respectable use. Today its use for a person with a disability is regarded as offensive and unacceptable.

Other offensive words include mentally retarded, insane, nut case, crazed, victim, freak, spastic, subnormal, and expressions like deaf and dumb, the disabled and handicapped.



language and **disability** (continued)

Such words are no longer acceptable because they ignore the identity of the individual and equate the condition with the person.

In recent years, the language of disability has moved away from medical jargon to a social perspective that reflects the relationship between the individual and his or her environment.

This approach recognises that people with a disability are more likely to be handicapped by environmental barriers and attitudes than by the disability itself.

Are the words disability and handicap interchangeable?

Disability is gradually replacing **handicap** as the more acceptable term and so the expression “person with a disability” has gained acceptance as the most preferred (and most easily remembered) form.

The emphasis is on the person first without denying or obscuring the reality of the disability.

Silly euphemisms such as “the physically challenged” or “differently able” are also unacceptable.



It can be difficult to know which particular terminology is most appropriate, accurate and acceptable to people with a disability.

The folded poster and the centre pages of this book lists inappropriate terms and appropriate alternatives.





a way with words

Words to watch

Abnormal, subnormal.
Negative terms that imply failure to reach perfection.

Afflicted with. Most people with a disability don't see themselves as afflicted.

Birth defect, also congenital defect, deformity.

Blind (the), visually impaired (the).

Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound. A wheelchair provides mobility not restriction.

Cripple, crippled. These terms convey a negative image of a twisted ugly body.

Acceptable alternatives

Specify the disability.

Say the "person has (the disability)".

Say "person with a disability since birth", "person with congenital disability".

Say "person who is blind", "person with a vision impairment".

Say "uses a wheelchair".

Say "has a physical or mobility disability".

Guidelines for the portrayal of people with a disability



Words to watch

Deaf (the). People who are deaf are those who identify as a part of the deaf community or who use sign language. “The deaf community” is only appropriate when referring to the community.

Deaf and dumb. Inability to hear and speak. Does not imply any intellectual disability.

Defective, deformed.
Degrading terms.

Disabled (the).

Dwarf (negative connotation).

Epileptic.

Fit (attack/spell).

Handicapped (the).

Acceptable alternatives

When speaking about an individual say “person who is deaf”.

Say “hearing impaired”.
Lack of speech usually results from impaired hearing.

Specify the disability.

Say “people with a disability”.

Say “short statured person”.

Say “person with epilepsy”.

Say “seizure”.

Say “person with a disability” unless referring to an environmental or attitudinal barrier, in such cases “person who is handicapped by a disability” is appropriate.



a way with words

Words to watch

Insane also lunatic, maniac, mental patient, mentally diseased, neurotic, psycho, schizophrenic, unsound mind etc. Derogatory terms.

Invalid. The literal sense of the word is “not valid”. Avoid.

Mentally retarded also defective, feeble minded, imbecile, moron, retarded. Offensive, inaccurate terms.

Mongol. Outdated and derogatory.

Patient. Only use in context of doctor/patient relationship or in hospital.

Physically/intellectually/vertically challenged, differently abled. Ridiculous euphemisms for disability.

Acceptable alternatives

Say “person with psychiatric disability” or specific condition.

Say “person with a disability”.

Say “person with an intellectual disability”.

Say “has Down Syndrome”.

Say “person with a disability”.

Say “person with a disability”.

Guidelines for the portrayal of people with a disability



Words to watch

People with disabilities. This phrase refers to people who have multiple disabilities.

Spastic. Usually refers to a person with cerebral palsy or who has uncontrollable spasms. Derogatory, often term of abuse. Should never be used as a noun.

Special. Overused, for example “special person”.

Suffers from, sufferer, stricken with.

Vegetative. Offensive and degrading.

Victim. People with a disability are not necessarily victims and prefer not to be perceived as such.

Acceptable alternatives

Say “person with multiple disabilities” or people with **a** disability (there is emerging awareness of this protocol).

Say “person with a disability”.

Describe the person/event/achievement as you would normally.

Not all people with a disability actually suffer. These terms should not be used indiscriminately. Say “person with a disability”.

Say “in a coma”, “comatose” or “unconscious”.

Say “has a disability”.



stereotyping

Stereotypes can lead to discrimination as they take away a person's individuality and oversimplify qualities which may have a passing acquaintance with the truth.

The portrayal of people with a disability as helpless, mindless or suffering beings deserving of pity and sympathy is one of the many powerful stereotypes which can lead to discriminatory treatment.

Positive portrayal of people with a disability involves presenting them as individuals with a variety of qualities.

This does not mean that the disability should be hidden, ignored or deemed irrelevant but it should not be the focus of description except when the subject is disability.

Be careful also not to imply that people with a disability are to be feared, pitied or ignored or that on the other hand they are somehow more courageous, special or heroic than others.

Avoid the use of the word "normal" in contrast with other people.



Common stereotypes to avoid

- ▶ disability is a monumental tragedy
- ▶ people with a disability are objects of pity and charity
- ▶ people with a disability who do things like get married and have children are extraordinary
- ▶ people with a disability lead boring, uneventful lives
- ▶ families, particularly spouses of people with a disability, are exceptionally heroic for living with a fate worse than death
- ▶ people with a disability are asexual
- ▶ people with a disability are something to be ashamed of
- ▶ people with disabilities who excel are superheros rather than successful sportspeople, students, etc

Photographs send their own messages. They can focus on a person's disability or equipment rather than the person. They can devalue the person by using inappropriate settings or perspectives.



research, writing, reporting

Coverage of people with a disability is often long on emotion and inspiration but short on issues.

One of the hardest worked clichés is of someone succeeding “in spite of” their disability. People often succeed because of their disability, not in spite of their disability.

Be sensitive to people’s sense of self-esteem and the way in which derogatory labelling can demean and dehumanise people with disabilities.

In many contexts it is quite unnecessary to mention a person’s disability. Yet this characteristic is often mentioned in stories.

Gratuitous specification of disability may result in its overemphasis to the exclusion of other characteristics. This creates the impression that the person referred to is somehow an oddity - not quite an ordinary member of the community.

Be original and creative in portrayals of individuals with a disability.

Frequently, when a person with a disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human interest story line predominates, (e.g. how the individual has overcome overwhelming odds), this usually places the focus of the story on the disability.



Broaden and deepen your understanding of disability issues.

There are few examples of in-depth treatment of issues important to the disability community (eg history of treatment/ attitudes to people with a disability, development of the worldwide disability rights movement, lack of physical access to public facilities, education and employment issues).

Be inclusive. The views of people with a disability as a group or individual are seldom featured in stories dealing with general interest issues such as child care, public transport, the environment.

Advertising copy writers should note that 18% of the Australian population has a disability. In

Australian advertising, people with disabilities are completely invisible. But people with a disability do buy detergent, ice cream cones, shampoo, underwear, cars, sanitary napkins and even condoms!



when interviewing a person with a disability

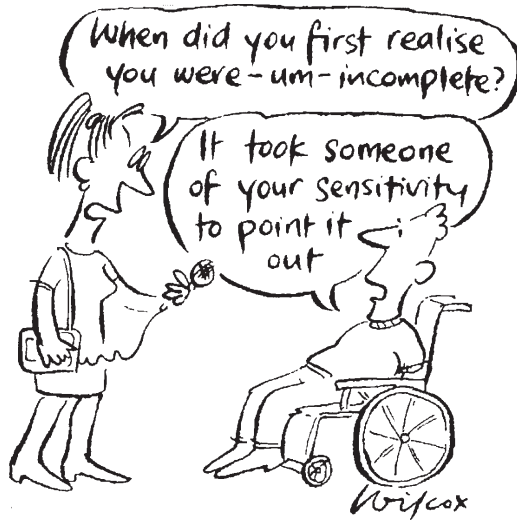
Don't hold back from asking frank questions, eg how the person manages certain tasks.

Usually people with a disability aren't precious and fragile about their disabilities. But on the other hand, intrusive personal questions, for example about a person's sex life, can be very offensive. Be matter-of-fact but remember that honest answers deserve honest treatment and should never be used in a sensational or morbid way.

Be honest about the story angle. If the story is about discrimination in the workplace then to include details about a person's medical condition unless relevant is quite unjustified.

Do not gratuitously emphasise physical differences or adaptive aids and technologies in visual or written treatments unless these are the focus of, or relevant to, the story. For example, if a person in a wheelchair is being interviewed about neighbourhood environmental pollution the visual focus should be the person not the wheelchair.

Don't assume you understand how the person feels about having a disability. Even if you know someone with a similar condition, this person may not think or feel the same way. Ask how he or she feels.



Don't concentrate on the medical perspective.

It may be interesting but you may overlook the telling human interest details of someone who is experiencing a disability. Don't assume someone is ill simply because she or he has a disability.

Don't feel embarrassed or guilty if you have difficulty understanding the person you are interviewing.

He or she will probably be used to it and will have developed ways of coping. Be patient and persevere.

Sit at the same level as the person being interviewed.

Ask if you can be heard clearly or if it is better to sit on one side rather than the other.

Try to interview the person alone, although a second person may be necessary as an attendant or an interpreter.

Sometimes friends and family may interrupt and presume to speak for the person being interviewed. Ignore these intrusions.

Resist the pressure to get the 30 second grab.



when interviewing a **person with a disability** (continued)

Allow the person you are interviewing the courtesy of telling events and particular details at his or her own pace.

In some cases you may need to:

- ▶ Ask if you should make arrangements in advance. An interpreter, for example, may be needed if the person has hearing loss or is not able to speak or communicate in a conventional way.
- ▶ Ask the person being interviewed to choose where to meet. Not all places are accessible to people with mobility problems. Additionally lack of affordable, accessible transport may be an issue.

A person with a hearing loss may find it difficult to concentrate if the surroundings are noisy.

Following an interview ask yourself:

- ▶ How can I portray the person I have just met in the most positive way, being mindful that their situation is not sensationalised or patronised?
- ▶ Is a reference to a disability necessary to a story? If it is, am I using appropriate terminology (eg “people with a disability” not “the disabled” or “handicapped”)?
- ▶ Is this piece accurate and unbiased? Have I avoided sensationalism?

when providing public information



Written information

Printed information should be in at least 12 point size type. The type should be of a colour that contrasts with the paper to be printed, (black type on white is optimum).

Information for people who have vision impairment

Presenting information in large print will benefit readers with low vision. Ideally use 16-18 point sans serif type, printed on off-white non-glossy paper with print of an adequate density to provide good contrast, ie. black or a dark colour.

Alternative formats such as braille, audio-tapes, talking books and computer disks are

available to communicate information to people who have severe vision impairment.

Radio

Radio is another way of providing information to people who experience difficulty reading. All radio stations present information either as commercial or community service announcements.

Information for people with hearing difficulties

The Australian Hearing Service estimates that one in every ten individuals experience difficulty hearing, and approximately half of these people would benefit by using a hearing aid.



when providing public information (continued)

Audio loop

An audio loop in public meeting places such as halls, churches, seminar rooms, lecture theatres and schools will allow people who use hearing aids to participate.

TTY (telephone typewriter)

Organisations can communicate with the growing number of people who are profoundly deaf by installing a TTY.

Sign language

Skilled sign language interpreters are available, and classes are conducted by TAFE for people wishing to learn Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN). To organise a sign language

interpreter in Queensland call the Queensland Deaf Society on 07 3356 8255.

Guidelines

Guidelines for providing information to people with a sensory disability are available from Disability Services Queensland.

We all have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

Some suggestions to improve communication with people with a disability follow when talking with a person with a disability:

- ▶ Establish and maintain eye contact at the same level as much as possible

communicating with people with a disability



- ▶ Face and speak directly to the person rather than through the companion/attendant/sign language interpreter who may also be present
- ▶ Never speak about the person as if they are invisible, cannot understand what is being said or can't speak for themselves
- ▶ Don't put people with a disability on a pedestal or talk to them in patronising terms as if performing normal, everyday activities were exceptional (eg "Oh, do you cook your own meals? How amazing!").
- ▶ Always respect the person's dignity, individuality and desire for independence. If help is required in a given situation, do not assist without asking first.
- ▶ Refer to adults with a disability in the same way you would refer to any other adult. Don't refer to them by their names where in similar circumstances with a non-disabled interviewee you would use a title such as Mr, Ms or Dr.



references

A Way With Words: Guidelines for the Portrayal of People with a Disability has been based on the material contained in the following sources:

“Media Guidelines”, Disability Council of NSW, 169-183, Liverpool Street, Sydney. Author Joan Hume.

“A Way With Words” Guidelines and Appropriate Technology for the Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities. Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat, Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario KIA OM5.

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“Language Matters” Guidelines for the Use of Non-Discriminatory Language at the University of Technology, Sydney; Published by the Equal Opportunity Unit.

“Responsibility”: People with Disabilities, Skilling Staff in Vocational Education, Training and Employment Sectors; The National Staff Development Committee, Chadstone, Victoria 1994.

“Words Matter” A Guide to the Language of Disability. For people working in communications. Published by NZ Disabled; PO Box 90-366, Auckland, New Zealand.



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information on
Disability Services Queensland

For information on disability services contact:

**The Disability Information and
Awareness Line (DIAL)**

Disability Services Queensland

Telephone (07) 3224 8444

Freecall 1800 177 120

TTY* (07) 3224 8021

Email dial@disability.qld.gov.au

www.disability.qld.gov.au

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