

Thinking about the language of disability

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Use this guide when writing public-facing, customer-facing or colleague-facing information about disability. It is designed to help you choose respectful, clear language while recognising that individual preferences vary. Where someone has told you how they describe themselves, mirror their language.

This document includes some problematic and offensive terms so that readers know which words to avoid.

Language Check

Use	Avoid
Disabled person/ people	Handicapped, special needs, handicapable, differently abled, cripple, invalid
Non-disabled	Normal, healthy, able-bodied, typical, of sound body/mind
Has.. (a disability or condition)	Suffers from, victim of, afflicted by, stricken by, troubled with
Learning disabled person/ has learning disability	Retarded, simple, slow, afflicted, brain-damaged, intellectually challenged, feeble-minded, mentally handicapped
Poor mental health/ mental ill health	Insane, crazy, maniac, psycho, lunatic, demented, mentally deranged
Deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing, non-verbal	The deaf, deaf and mute, deaf and dumb, hearing impaired
Blind, visually impaired or partially sighted	The blind
Wheelchair user	Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair
Accessible parking Parking reserved for disabled people Accessible toilet	Disabled parking, handicapped parking Disabled toilet, handicapped toilet

Understanding the terminology

This section shares some common terms that you might use, and Attitude is Everything's view on them.

Yes	Use this term on websites, written materials and general use.
?	This term is okay in some situations but use caution in written material.
No	Avoid using this term in writing or speaking to customers, colleagues and professional contacts.

Words	Yes	?	No	Notes
Disabled people	x			The term 'disabled people' uses "identity first" language that is recommended by the Social Model of Disability. In the UK, most disabled people prefer this term. This phrasing acknowledges that: - people are disabled by society, rather than as a direct result of having a condition or impairment. - the experience of navigating society when you are disabled has a huge impact on your sense of self.
People with disabilities		x		People with disabilities is "person first" language. People who prefer "person first" language argue that it acknowledges that disabled people are, first and foremost, people and not defined by their experiences. However, many people feel it implies being disabled is something insignificant and that it ignores the barriers created by society. When speaking to someone who uses person-first language, we recommend mirroring it. We would recommend using the term "disabled people" when speaking generally or in written materials.

Words	Yes	?	No	Notes
The disabled			x	Describing a whole group of people as “the...” followed by a collective noun can feel dehumanising and as though you are assuming many people have identical thoughts, values and experiences.
Handicapped			x	This is a term that was in common use in the 1980s but is now seen as outdated and inappropriate. It is still commonly used by people from America or parts of Europe. However, you should avoid using it in the UK.
Differently abled			x	This term was designed in the 1980s in the US by non-disabled people trying to be more polite about the “disabled” experience. Although well meaning, many disabled people find it patronising and trite (everyone has different abilities, so it doesn’t really mean anything). It also ignores that people are disabled by barriers rather than the term being a reflection on individual abilities. This term can really anger some disabled people and should be avoided.
Autistic person	x			Many autistic people prefer “identity first” language to reflect the experience of being autistic as a key role in shaping identity.
Neurodivergent/ Neurodiverse	x			These are umbrella terms used when talking about people whose brains process information, communicate or experience the world differently from what society often treats as typical. This can include autistic people, people with ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette’s and other cognitive or neurological differences. “Neurodivergent” usually describes an individual, while “neurodiverse” describes a group made up of people with different neurotypes.

Words	Yes	?	No	Notes
"On the spectrum..."			x	This can sound patronising and dismissive and reflect assumptions on the part of the speaker.
Deaf person	x			Many Deaf people prefer identity-first language because being Deaf is not only about access to spoken language. It can also reflect a shared cultural identity, language and set of experiences with other Sign Language users.
Hearing impaired			x	Many Deaf people feel alienated or offended by the term 'hearing impaired'. Some people who have acquired hearing loss later in life may use this term. Would recommend "Deaf and hard of hearing" on websites and marketing or when talking about groups of customers. It's also important to avoid terms such as 'deaf and dumb' or 'deaf mute' as these are offensive.
Hard of hearing		x		This is generally a more acceptable term than "hearing impaired", particularly for people with mild to moderate hearing loss or people who use the term for themselves. However, preferences vary, so it is best to mirror the language someone uses about themselves. For general public-facing materials, "Deaf and hard of hearing" is often a more inclusive phrase.
Wheelchair user	x			This is a neutral term to describe someone who uses a wheelchair.
Wheelchair bound			x	Describing people as being "bound" or "confined" to their wheelchairs makes assumptions about how people think and feel.

Words	Yes	?	No	Notes
				For many people, having a wheelchair is liberating rather than restraining as it helps them to get around safely and comfortably.
“Suffering from...”			x	It isn't your assumption to make whether someone else is “suffering” or not.
Non-verbal		x		This is commonly understood, but it can imply that someone does not communicate at all. Many people who do not use spoken language communicate in other ways, including signing, gestures, writing, communication devices or other forms of AAC. Where possible, use a more specific phrase such as “does not use spoken language”, “uses AAC” or “communicates non-verbally”, and mirror the language the person uses about themselves.
Non-disabled	x			This is the clearest and most neutral term for people who are not disabled. It avoids implying that disabled people are abnormal, unhealthy or less capable. It is usually the best term to use when making a distinction between disabled and non-disabled people.
Able bodied			x	This term is common, but it is less precise than “non-disabled”. It can suggest that disabled people's bodies are not capable or “able”, and it only really refers to physical disability. It excludes disabled people whose impairments are not physical, such as some sensory, mental health, learning or neurodivergent experiences. Use “non-disabled” instead unless you specifically mean people without physical impairments.
Normal person			x	Avoid using this to describe people who are not disabled. It implies that disabled people are not “normal”, which can feel othering and offensive. Use “non-disabled person” instead.

Words	Yes	?	No	Notes
What are your access requirements?	x			This is a clear and respectful way to ask what someone needs in order to take part. It focuses on removing barriers and providing support, rather than asking someone to disclose a diagnosis or impairment. It is usually more helpful than asking whether someone has “special needs”.
Do you have any special needs?			x	Avoid this phrase in most contexts. “Special needs” can sound outdated and patronising because it suggests that reasonable access or support is unusual or extra. Instead: Ask about “access requirements” or “support needs” instead. “Special educational needs” is still used in education and legal contexts, but it is not usually the best phrase for customer-facing or event communications.
Personal Assistant (PA)	x			This is a neutral and widely understood term for someone who provides practical support to a disabled person. It can cover a wide range of assistance, including communication, mobility, personal organisation or support with attending an event. It is a good general term, especially when the exact nature of the support is not known.
Essential Companion	x			This can be a helpful term in event access information because it recognises that the person attending with a disabled customer may be essential to their ability to take part. However, not everyone will identify with it, and some people may prefer “Personal Assistant”, “PA”, “companion” or another term. For public-facing materials, “Personal Assistant / Essential Companion” is a useful inclusive phrase because it gives people more than one way to recognise the role.

Words	Yes	?	No	Notes
Support worker		x		This usually describes someone who provides paid or professional support. It is appropriate when that is the person's actual role, but it should not be used as a blanket term for everyone attending with a disabled person. Many assistants or companions at events are friends, family members or other trusted people rather than professional support workers.
Carer		x		"Carer" often means someone who provides personal care or ongoing care, such as support with washing, dressing, eating or daily living. Some people use this term for themselves or for someone who supports them, and it is fine to mirror that language when they do. However, avoid using "carer" as a default term for someone accompanying a disabled person to an event. It may not describe the relationship or the support being provided, and it can feel patronising or inaccurate for some disabled people. "Personal Assistant / Essential Companion" is usually a better general phrase.