

Writing about Disabled People

Guidelines for journalists from GLAD (Greater London Action on Disability)

Language is very important but use of language varies from decade to decade. The language we use is the language used by the Disability Movement; it is not language as defined by GLAD. You will find wide variation of usage, even amongst disabled people. But the language we are saying should NOT be used is mainly used by government departments, local authorities, organisations FOR disabled people and most non-disabled people.

Disabled people try to define disability in terms of the social model and within this language is crucial. An understanding of the social model will lead to greater understanding of the above language. The Social Model of Disability is used by the majority of organisations OF disabled people. We believe that it is society's physical, sensory, attitudinal and behavioural barriers which make us disabled, it is not our particular conditions or impairments. Society has also chosen language which is not what those of us in the Disability Movement would generally use.

The guidelines in this factsheet will help you to make better choices in terms of language and portrayal of disabled people.

General guidelines

Do not focus on impairments/conditions unless it is crucial to the document. Try not to write tear-jerking stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injuries. It is far better to focus on the issues or barriers which affect the quality of life of disabled people such as accessible transport, accessible housing, affordable healthcare, employment opportunities and discrimination.

Do not portray successful disabled people as superhuman. The public may like stories about super-achievers and wheelchair users scaling mountain tops for example, but portraying disabled people in this way raises the false expectation that all disabled people should achieve this level.

Do not sensationalise a disability by using phrases like 'afflicted with', 'suffers from', 'victim of', 'crippled with' and so on. Use phrases such as 'person who has arthritis' or 'woman who has cystic fibrosis' instead.

Do not use generic labels for groups of disabled people, such as 'the deaf', 'the blind' or 'the disabled'. Try to emphasise the person not the impairment and say things like 'deaf person', 'blind person' and 'disabled people' instead.

Try to focus on the individual and not on their particular impairment or condition. Say things like 'children who are blind' rather than 'blind children' or 'woman with epilepsy' rather than 'epileptic woman'.

Do not use emotional descriptions such as 'unfortunate', 'pitiful', 'mad', 'psycho', 'stupid', 'mental', "handicapped" etc.

Do not use euphemisms to describe disabled people. Phrases such as 'mentally incompetent', 'mentally deficient', 'physically incapacitated' and 'visually challenged' are considered to be condescending by disabled people.

Never refer to a disabled person as a patient unless you are discussing their relationship with their doctor.

The following list of words and phrases are preferred words when writing about disabled people.

- Disabled people **NOT** the disabled, the handicapped, people with disabilities.
- Non-disabled person **NOT** normal, able-bodied, healthy.
- Person with learning difficulties **NOT** mentally handicapped, retarded, thick, stupid, person with learning disabilities.
- Blind person, visually impaired person, partially sighted person **NOT** the blind.
- Deaf person, the deaf community, hard of hearing, partially deaf, hearing impaired **NOT** the deaf, deaf and dumb.
- Person with epilepsy **NOT** epileptic.
- Mental health system user/mental health system survivor, person with mental health impairment **NOT** mentally ill, mad, dangerous schizophrenic, mentally handicapped.
- Wheelchair user **NOT** wheelchair bound, the wheelchair.
- Physically disabled person, person with physical impairment **NOT** cripple.
- Woman/man with sickle cell **NOT** sickle cell sufferer.
- HIV positive, person with HIV **NOT** AIDS carrier.
- Person with arthritis **NOT** crippled with arthritis, arthritic.
- Person with Cerebral Palsy **NOT** spastic.
- Person with dyslexia, dyslexic **NOT** wordblind, can't spell.
- Unaware, does not understand the information, does not listen **NOT** blind to the truth, stupid, deaf to reason.
- Accessible parking space, Blue Badge holders parking space **NOT** disabled parking space.
- Accessible toilets **NOT** disabled toilets.
- Accessible entrance, level/ramped entrance **NOT** disabled entrance.
- Parking permits for disabled peoples' section, Blue Badge permits **NOT** disabled parking permits section.
- Accessible housing **NOT** disabled housing.
- Person with Down's syndrome **NOT** mongol, spastic.
- Personal assistant **NOT** carer.