Disability & Accessibility Language Handout
for the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (HFES) Events

Why a handout on language?

Language about disability and accessibility can be a difficult topic due to the high tensions surrounding these issues. This handout intends to provide a safe reference including guidance for language that is acceptable in its use as well as terms that should generally be avoided.

The terms suggested in this handout are to help you cultivate a safe, welcoming, and compassionate environment for disabled people, people with disabilities, and people with access needs and also to mitigate the harms experienced by these populations when using such dehumanizing language.

Person-First vs. Identity-First Language

While many professional environments have trained people to always use Person-First Language (PFL - i.e., person with disability, person with autism, person with hearing impairment, etc.), multiple communities within disability and accessibility spaces have a preference for Identity-First Language (IFL - i.e., disabled person, Autistic person, Deaf person, etc.). The conversations surrounding person-first and identity-first language are full of nuance that recognizes the various histories and individual experiences that disabled people and people with disabilities have. All of these nuances are valid.

In general, if you do not have a preference for either language due to your own experience, it is good practice to switch between both forms of language (PFL vs. IFL).

However, when discussing language with a/nother disabled person, person with disability, or person with access needs, please defer to their chosen language when referring to them.

Please use this handout as a starting point to explore any of the words presented to have a deeper understanding of why certain language is and/or isn't preferred.

Other Disability Language Resources

- [Ableism/Language](#) by Lydia X. Z. Brown (2012)
- [Disability Language Style Guide](#) by the National Center on Disability and Journalism (2021)
- [Here Are Some Dos and Don'ts of Disability Language](#) by Andrew Pulrang (2020)
- [Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up!](#) by National Youth Leadership Network Kids As Self Advocates (2006)
- [The Language of Disability](#) by Rhoda Olkin, PhD, and Dana S. Dunn, PhD (2021)

Ok to Use

- disabled people
- people with disabilities
- access needs
- accommodations
- different bodies and minds
- bodily and mental differences
- blind & low vision

- intellectually/developmentally disabled
- person with intellectual/developmental disability
- D/deaf or hard-of-hearing/HOH
- cognitive/developmental disability
- neurodiverse or neurodivergent
- Autistic

Please Avoid…

This section outlines a number of words that may come as a surprise to you; not everyone is aware of the ableism associated with the language below. More directly, much of the derogatory language many of us use on a daily basis actually has its base in the eugenics movement, unfortunately. Knowing this, and often being the butt of jokes dependent on many of these terms, disability and accessibility communities are constantly discussing the histories and impact of the words listed below.

Please note that some of these terms may be reclaimed by individuals in each of these communities. However, if you are not a member of these communities, please avoid the use of these words.

Euphemisms

- special needs
- "differently abled"
- "diversability" or disABILITY
- "handi-capable"
- gifted/challenged

Language with Negative Connotations

- "suffering from" / "victim of"
- abnormal
- visually or hearing impaired
- defected/defective
- disfigured or deformed
- high-functioning/low-functioning
- wheelchair bound/confined

Derogatory Language

- the r-word
- spaz
- cripple
- lame
- stupid/idiot/moron/dumb
- crazy/insane/nuts/psycho/mad

Outdated Language

- handicapped
- the disabled, the blind, etc.

Disability & Accessibility Vocabulary

- **Accessibility**: the creation of environments and products that may be utilized by multiple people, regardless of disability or other life circumstances, without requiring individualized alterations and adjustments via accommodations
- **Access copies**: copies of presentation materials (i.e., slides, handouts, prepared spoken scripts, etc.) provided digitally and/or physically to audience members who may follow the materials during or review materials following the presentation
- **Access needs**: an individual's needs that must be met to meaningfully engage with any environment or product
- **Accessible introduction**: an introduction including a visual description of the speaker alongside other traditional introductory content as well as an outline of access features
- **Accommodations**: the individual changes made in any environment or product to meet a person's access needs
- **Alt text**: a brief text description of an image provided in the coding of digital files for screen-reader users to access image content
- **Audio description**: a spoken narration describing the visuals in videos and live performances or presentations
- **Captions**: the spoken language and additional sounds presented in a video; captions can be closed (capable of being turned on or off) or open (embedded into the video and unable to be removed)
- **Image description**: a detailed written description of an image
- **Large print**: documents provided in at least 18-point font specifically designed for blind and low-vision readers
- **Standard print**: documents provided in 10-, 12-, or 14-point font
- **Visual description**: a description of visual content, whether digitally or in-person, spoken or written, and for static or moving visuals