

# Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People With Disabilities

**T**HESE GUIDELINES, EXCERPTED FROM THOSE DEVELOPED by the Media Project, Research and Training Center on Independent Living, University of Kansas, offer suggestions for appropriate ways to describe people with disabilities resulting from injury and explain preferred terminology. They reflect input from over 100 national disability organizations and have been reviewed and endorsed by media and disability experts throughout the country. Although opinions may differ on some terms, the Guidelines represent the current consensus among disability organizations. Portions of the Guidelines have been adopted in the 1986 edition of the Associated Press Stylebook.

*Please use the Guidelines when you write about people with disabilities.* If you have any questions or would like more information or additional copies of the Guidelines, contact: Media Project, Research and Training Center on Independent Living, BCR/3111 Haworth, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045. You can also phone: 913-842-7694 (voice/TDD).

## Portrayal Issues

Please consider the following when writing about people with disabilities.

1. Do not focus on a disability unless it is crucial to a story.
2. Do not portray people with disabilities who succeed as superhuman. Even though the public tends to admire superachievers, portraying people with disabilities as superstars raises false expectations that all people with disabilities should achieve at this level.
3. Do not sensationalize a disability by saying afflicted with, crippled with, suffers from, victim of, and so on. Instead, say *person who has multiple sclerosis, man who had (or contacted) polio.*
4. Do not label people as part of a disability group, such as the retarded. Instead, say *people with mental retardation.*
5. Put people first, not their disability. Say *woman with arthritis, children who are deaf, people with disabilities.* This puts the focus on the individual, not on a particular functional limitation. Because of editorial pressures to be succinct, we know it is not always possible to use preferred style (e.g., to put people first). Consider the following alternatives. These suggestions are not necessarily

sanctioned by the disability groups who have endorsed the Guidelines. However, if the portrayal is positive and accurate, the following variations may be used: *disabled citizens, nondisabled people, wheelchair-user, deaf girl, brain-damaged woman, paralyzed child, and so on. Crippled, deformed, suffers from, victim of, the retarded, etc are never acceptable under any circumstances.*

6. Emphasize abilities not limitations. Consider: *uses a wheelchair/braces, walks with crutches, rather than confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound, or is crippled.* Similarly, do not use emotional descriptions such as *unfortunate, pitiful, and so forth.*
7. Show persons with disabilities as active members of society. *Portraying persons with disabilities interacting with nondisabled people in social and work environments, i.e., putting them "in the landscape," helps to breakdown barriers and open lines of communications.*
8. People is preferred over persons when referring to a large segment of a population, i.e., *people with mental retardation.* Persons is appropriate for a specific number under 25, i.e., *12 persons with disabilities hold management positions in the company.*

## Appropriate Terminology for Specific Disabilities

Listed below are preferred words that reflect a positive attitude in portraying disabilities.

**Blind.** Describes a condition in which a person has loss of vision for ordinary life purposes. Generally, anyone with less than 10% of normal vision would be regarded as legally blind.

**Burn Injury.** Describes damage to the skin which permanently alters its appearance. Rather than say burn victim say *burn survivor or person with a burn injury.*

**Deaf.** Deafness refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech through the ear. Hearing impaired is the generic term preferred by some individuals to refer to any degree of hearing loss — from mild to profound. It includes both hard of hearing and deaf. Hard of hearing refers to a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. Examples: use *woman*

*who is deaf, boy who is hard of hearing, people who are hearing-impaired.*

**Disability.** General term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability, for example, to walk, hear, learn, or lift. It may refer to a physical, mental, or sensory condition. Use as descriptive noun or adjective, such as: *persons who are mentally and physically disabled, man with a disability.*

**Handicap.** Not a synonym for disability. Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or by one's own self. Handicap can be used when citing laws and situations but should not be used to describe a disability. Say instead *"The stairs are a handicap for her,"* or *"He is handicapped by the inaccessible bus."*

**Head injury.** Describes a condition where there is temporary or long-term interruption in brain functioning. Use *persons with head injury, people who have sustained brain damage, woman who has traumatic brain injury, boy with a closed head injury.*

**Mental illness/Mental disability.** Describes a condition where there is loss of social and/or vocational skills. Do not use mentally deranged, crazy, deviant. Mental disability describes all of the recognized forms of mental illness, severe emotional disorder, or mental retardation. Terms such as neurotic, psychotic, and schizophrenic should be reserved for technical medical writing only. Use *man with mental illness, woman with a mental disorder.*

**Nondisabled.** Appropriate term for persons without disabilities. The terms normal, able-bodied, healthy, or whole are inappropriate.

**Seizure.** Describes an involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness, etc. resulting from a neurological condition, such as epilepsy. Rather than epileptic, say *girl with epilepsy* or *boy with a seizure disorder*. The term convulsion would only be used for seizures involving contraction of the entire body.

**Spastic.** Describes a muscle with sudden abnormal and involuntary spasms. Not appropriate for describing someone with cerebral palsy. *Muscles are spastic, not people.*

**Special.** Describes that which is different or uncommon about any person. Do not use to describe persons with disabilities (except when citing laws or regulations).

**Specific learning disability.** Describes a permanent condition that affects the way individuals with average or above-average intelligence take in, retain, and express information. *Specific is preferred, because it emphasizes that only certain learning processes are affected.*

**Speech disorder.** Describes a condition where a person has limited or difficult speech patterns. Use *child who has a speech disorder*. For a person with no verbal speech capability, use *woman without speech*. Do not use mute.

**Spinal cord injury.** Describes a condition where there has been permanent damage to the spinal cord. *Quadriplegia describes substantial or total loss of function in all four extremities. Paraplegia refers to substantial or total loss of function in the lower part of the body only.* Say *man with paraplegia, woman who is paralyzed.*

**Visually impaired** is the generic term preferred by some individuals to refer to all degrees of vision loss. Examples: *boy who is blind, girl who is visually impaired, man who has low vision.*



*This symbol is used by WID to represent the efforts of people with disabilities to achieve full integration into society.*