Disability and Language Style Guide for *History@Work* and *The Public Historian*

Introduction

Using words related to disability thoughtfully is a tool for accessibility, inclusion, and allyship in editing and writing. This guide is meant to provide resources on commonly used, disability-related words or language in public life (and therefore on *History@Work* and in *The Public Historian*). It is not exhaustive and cannot serve as a definitive guide to style. Language is constantly changing. And not all writers, historians, advocates, or activists will agree on what words to use for this topic or others, though mainstream editorial guides have adopted many of the principles outlined below. This guide focuses on the language the compiler encounters most often in the field. It also reflects the perspective of activists and scholars based primarily in the US. Scholars of and activists in the Global South have different perspectives on language not represented here.[1] Check out the additional resources linked throughout and at the end of the guide for more information or deeper reading on the history related to this style guide. If you use this guide for your own editing, please let us know whether it has been useful!

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[1] There are several critiques and efforts to dismantle the US- and western-centric approach to disability history, particularly considering a growing Global South body of literature for which western theories and examples are inappropriate.

Commonly deployed usages to avoid, and what to use instead

Words or phrases that people commonly use today that should be avoided on *History@Work* and in *The Public Historian* are listed below.

lame
idiot
retarded
crippled
special (derived from "special education")
handicap(ped)
mentally challenged
moron
crazy
stupid

Note that disabled people use some words that might sound outdated [(such as "crip")](). Therefore, using words like "crip" will sometimes be appropriate depending on the context.

Words and phrases like those listed above have been used in the past to exclude and marginalize disabled people, which is one reason why they are unacceptable today. These words are typically used as insults. In that case, suggest another way for the author to write about a person, place, thing, or idea.

When quoting a historical source, the author should contextualize these words and use them only when necessary.

If the writer is using this terminology to refer to disabled people because they are simply unaware of more contemporary

terminology for disabled people, encourage them to use accepted terminology from the list below or ask the person they are referring to about how they self-identify.

disabled people or people with disabilities
physical disability
sensory disability
intellectual disability
developmental disability
learning disability
madness[2]
bodymind[3]

Note that disabled people have claimed or reclaimed the term "madness" in an empowering way.

There are words or phrases you may need to use that define a disability more narrowly, but the list above is a good place to start. See also the "Disability Language Style" guide, published by the National Center on Disability and Journalism.

Writers should avoid the words or phrases below because they have been used to refer to disabled people but are used in such a way that make a person's disability seem like a burden or bother.

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[2] Part of list from: Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History,* ed. Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) 7.

[3] For more on language related to disability, including the term "bodymind," see Sami Schalk, "Disability," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York University Press), Accessed September 27, 2023, https://keywords.nyupress.org/gender-and-sexuality-studies/essay/disability/.

Wheelchair-bound; in a wheelchair; confined to a wheelchair

Use instead: wheelchair user or person using a wheelchair

deaf and dumb
Use instead: d(D)eaf or hard of hearing. Note: If someone uses a way to communicate that is not speaking ("dumb"), note how they communicate (for example, with American Sign Language or through writing). Note that not all d(D)eaf people identify as disabled. Some deaf people prefer lower-case d, others prefer uppercase D (usually when referring to a formalized Deaf community.[4] See below for more on "mute."

people with challenges or special people

Use instead: Refer to the person's specific disability if relevant.

handicapable

Use instead: Refer to the person's disability if relevant.

OCD

Use instead: Describe what is meant instead of using this term in a derogatory or positive way (usually referring to someone being detail-oriented). Use only if referring to an actual medical diagnosis. (See style guide linked below.)

PTSD

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[4] See "Deaf," National Center on Disability Journalism, "Disability Language Style," https://ncdj.org/style-guide/, accessed January 25, 2022.

Use instead: Describe what is meant instead of using this term in a derogatory, casual, or ahistorical way. As above, use this term only when referring to diagnosed PTSD. (See style guide linked below.)

If possible, ask disabled people how they would like to be referred to. For example, some disabled people prefer person-first language (ex: person with a disability); today, many prefer "disabled person" (this should be your default). If you cannot ask a person about language, reference the "Disability Language Style" guide, published by the National Center on Disability and Journalism for up-to-date usage suggestions.

You should also avoid using disability as a metaphor. These metaphors are powerful because people have marginalized disabled people based on their disability and due to ableism.

Examples of common expressions to avoid:

I turned a blind eye to the indiscretion.

The university was deaf to our appeal.

She was struck dumb.

Congress was paralyzed by the impasse.

A snowstorm crippled the entire east coast.

The primary sources were mute on the topic.

Instead, write what you mean. For example, "A snowstorm resulted in all public transit shutting down on the east coast."

Do not use disability-related words to emphasize a point.

She was crazy busy.

Use instead: She was very busy.

The award they received was a bonkers amount of money.

Use instead: They received a lot of money.

Avoid using disability as a challenge to overcome or as what is known as "inspiration porn."

Avoid: They overcame their challenges as disabled students and were able to get a college degree.

Finally, avoid writing about disability when it's not relevant. For example, consider whether mentioning an artist's disability is relevant for interpretative goals.

Editing Tactics

There are many ways to suggest writers alter their wording or phrasing in such a way that points out a language problem but doesn't make the writer feel inadequate, guilty, or embarrassed. Disability history and disability studies are relatively new fields, and many people aren't familiar with new language standards. Always keep the subject of the writing and the readers in mind when suggesting changes. Here is an example of a way to suggest a change:

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Consider using a different word here other than "lame." Per *History@Work* or *Public Historian* style, we avoid words that have been used historically to other or marginalize disabled people. Is there another word or phrase you could use here that gets a similar point across? How about [insert suggestion here depending on context]?

If you have questions, feel free to get in touch with *History@Work*: historyatwork@ncph.org.

Further Reading

There are many things you could read on these topics, but here are some places to start. Some of the items below informed this guide. See also linked items above.

KEY RESOURCE: National Center on Disability Journalism, "Disability Language Style," https://ncdj.org/style-guide/, accessed November 2, 2023.

Douglas Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016)

Lydia X. Z. Brown, "Ableism/Language," *Autistic Hoya*, https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html, accessed January 14, 2022.

M. Leona Godin, "Helen Keller and the Problem of 'Inspiration Porn,'" *The New York Times*, October 21, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/opinion/helen-keller.html.

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Sins Invalid, "10 Principles of Disability Justice," Accessed November 2, 2023, https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice.

Talila A. Lewis, "Working Definition of Ableism: January 2022 Update," Blog, January 1, 2022, https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/working-definition-of-ableism-january-2022-update.

Mia Mingus, "Changing the Framework: Disability Justice: How our communities can move beyond access to wholeness," *Leaving Evidence*, February 12, 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/.

Alexandra Morris, "A Brief Guide to Disability Terminology and Theory in Ancient World Studies," Society for Classical Studies, August 30, 2021, https://classicalstudies.org/scs-blog/alexandra-morris/blog-brief-guide-disability-terminology-and-theory-ancient-world-studies.

Meg Roberts, "Inspiration Porn and Depictions of Impairment in Early America," *Public Disability History*, July 1, 2021, https://www.public-disabilityhistory.org/2021/06/inspiration-porn-and-depictions-of.html.

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Alice Wong, ed., *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the 21st Century* (New York: Vintage, 2020).

Karin Williams, "Before You Call the Candidate Who Stood Up From His Chair 'Inspiration,'" *The Mighty*, August 28, 2020, https://themighty.com/2020/08/madison-cawthorn-standing-wheelchair-rnc/.

Stella Young, "Objectification porn and the objectification of disability," *TedxTalks*, May 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxrS7-I_sMQ.

Acknowledgements

Invitation to Comment

As many people have said, accessibility is a process. If you have suggestions for adding to or revising this guide, please be in touch with *History@Work*: historyatwork@ncph.org.

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