



MANUAL OF STYLE FOR DEPICTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

This brochure is one response to a need identified by people with disabilities. The way we portray people with disabilities and our attitudes toward them are critical to their future...and to ours.

Disability vs. Handicap

A disability is a condition caused by accident, trauma, genetics or disease which may limit a person's mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function. Some people have one or more disabilities.

A handicap is a physical or attitudinal constraint imposed upon a person, regardless of whether that person has a disability. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines the handicap as "to put at a disadvantage."

People with disabilities prefer to be called just that: people with disabilities. They are not conditions or diseases. For example, an individual is not "an epileptic," but rather "a person with epilepsy."

When writing a story or advertisement, the writer should use the term "people with disabilities" exclusively or, at a minimum, as the initial reference. Subsequent references can use terms like "person with a disability" or "individuals with disabilities."

In certain circumstances, the terms "persons with disabilities" or "individuals with disabilities" may, for grammatical or narrative reasons, be more appropriate than "people with disabilities." Generally, however, "people with disabilities" is the preferred initial reference.

Written Communications

Copywriters should portray people with disabilities as they would anyone else – with all human strengths and weaknesses. In all advertising, writers should depict people with disabilities in an appropriate manner and non-judgmental manner. Never refer to people with disabilities as "disabled" simply to fill space or to accommodate design layouts.

Interviewing Techniques

When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or interpreter. Conduct interviews in a manner that emphasizes abilities, achievements and individual qualities.

Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when calling everyone present by their first name.

If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted before acting. Then listen to or ask for instructions.

Disability: related terms and their meanings

Blind/Visual Impairment. Blind refers to a total loss of vision. Visual impairment indicates partial vision, also referred to as partial sight.

Cerebral Palsy. A group of conditions resulting from damage to the central nervous system. Do not assume that a person with cerebral palsy also has mental retardation; the two do not necessarily or typically occur together.

Congenital Disability. A physical impairment existing since birth.

Deaf/Hard of Hearing. Deaf refers to a total loss of hearing. Hard of hearing refers to partial hearing loss ranging from slight to severe.

Developmental Disability. Any mental or physical disability manifested by the age of 22 that may continue indefinitely and result in substantial limitation in three or more of the following: self-care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self-direction, independent living or economic sufficiency.

Epilepsy. Term for various disorders marked by electrical disturbances of the central nervous system and typically manifested by seizures, which are involuntary muscular contractions.

Learning Disability. Condition affecting the understanding or use of spoken or written language.

Mental Illness/Mental Impairment. A psychiatric disability caused by numerous factors including a biological, physiological or psychological disorder or a chemical disorder of the brain.

Mental Retardation. Condition causing significantly below-average intellectual functioning.

Paraplegia/Hemiplegia/Quadriplegia. *Paraplegia:* paralysis of lower half of body. Involves partial or total loss of function of both legs. *Hemiplegia:* full or partial paralysis of one side of body caused by brain damage due to disease, trauma or stroke. *Quadriplegia:* paralysis of body involving partial or total loss of function in both arms and legs.

Service Animals. Any guide dog, signal dog or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability.

Speech Impairment. Limited or difficult-to-understand speech patterns.

Specific Terms You Should Avoid Using...

Overused Terms

The following are examples of terms that are frequently used incorrectly as stereotypes to depict people with disabilities:

- brave
- challenged
- courageousdisabled
- handi-capable
- inspirational

Inappropriate Terms

Never use any of the following terms when referring to people with disabilities:

- afflicted by/afflicted with
- cripp/cripple/crippled/the crippled/crippling
- deaf and dumb
- deformed
- homebound employment (use instead “employed in the home”)
- invalid
- normal (as the opposite of having a disability)

- unfortunate, pitiful, poor
- victim
- wheelchair bound/confined to a wheelchair (use instead “uses a wheelchair”)

Illinois Attorney General’s Office
www.IllinoisAttorneyGeneral.gov

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