Office for Nuclear Regulation

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Disability and inclusive language: why words are important

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Introduction

The words that we use to talk about disability are important. Our choice of words can make the difference between someone feeling engaged and included or ignored and excluded. Unfortunately, there are many unhelpful and negative stereotypes around disability, which are still in existence. Using words or phrases without thinking about their meaning can reinforce these stereotypes.

In this document you will find general pointers about how to describe disability in an inclusive way. Whilst most of the rules included here are commonly accepted, the debate around language and disability is ongoing as language continues to evolve.

If you need to describe a person's individual disability, the best way to do this is to ask the person how they would like you to describe them. It is much better to ask than assume.

Don't let the fear of using the wrong words put you off from engaging with a disabled colleague or stakeholder. Most disabled people won't mind if you get it wrong if your intention was right. Context is often as important as the words themselves.

General tips on language

If in doubt, always ask someone how they would like to be described. Don't make assumptions.

- Having a disability is just one aspect of who a person is. Try not to define someone by their disability. Consider whether you need to mention a person's disability in a piece of communication. Often, it is not necessary or appropriate. You may instead need to focus on what would make things easier for them.

- Not everyone identifies with the term 'disabled'. As an example, people who use British Sign Language, and who identify as part of the deaf community, may prefer to be referred to as 'Deaf'. Someone who has autism or dyslexia may not identify with the term disabled at all and may instead prefer 'neurodiverse' or 'autistic' or 'dyslexic'.

- Check whether the person prefers identity first or person first language. For example, one person with dyslexia may prefer to be described as 'dyslexic'. This is identity first language. Someone else may prefer someone 'who has dyslexia'. This is person first language.

- Avoid emotive terms. This includes terms such as 'victim' and language which disempowers disabled people and implies vulnerability, frailty, or dependency.

- Avoid terms which are patronising. Don't imply that someone is 'inspiring', 'brave' or a 'superhero' just because they have a disability.

- Use neutral terms. For example, use terms such as 'condition' instead of negative terms such as 'problem' or 'issue'.

- Do not use collective nouns. Terms such as 'the disabled' or 'the blind' suggest that people are part of a uniform group, rather than individuals with their own preferences and identity.

- In general, it is best to avoid medical terms. Terms such as 'diagnosis of' or 'illness' suggest that the person is sick or unwell and can be disempowering. These terms may be the most appropriate and necessary if you are writing in a medical context. It is still good to be aware of how they can be viewed by disabled people and people with long term conditions.

- Avoid phrases with a negative connotation. Most everyday phrases such as 'see you later' or 'look forward to hearing from you' are acceptable to someone who is blind or D/deaf. The exception is if the phrase has a negative connotation, such as 'to turn a blind eye' or 'it fell on deaf ears'.

- 'Disabled people' or 'people with disabilities'? Generally, if writing for a UK audience then 'disabled people' is often preferred over 'people with disabilities'. 'Disabled people' recognises that people are 'disabled' by society's response to them or by their long-term condition.

- **Do not ask people to 'declare or disclose' their disability. This may suggest that a person's disability is a secret or something that needs to be announced. Simply ask everyone if you can do anything differently to make things easier for them. Remember everyone has preferences regardless of whether they have a disability**.

- Consider cultural meaning. The words and phrases mentioned in this document relate to the use of English in the UK. Different words will be viewed as acceptable and unacceptable in other languages and cultures. It is important to take this into consideration when translating any information into another language.

Words to use and words to avoid

Please note that some of the words used in the following section may cause offence.

They have been included to help increase understanding.

Avoid	Use
• mental, schizo, psycho	• a person with a mental health condition
• cripple, invalid	• disabled person, person with a disability, person with a long-term condition
• victim or suffer of	• someone who has
• midget	• a person with dwarfism, or someone of short stature. Note that some people prefer 'dwarf'
• fits or spells	• seizures
• mentally handicapped, retarded, slow	• a person with a learning disability, or someone with a learning disability
• brain damaged	• brain injury
• wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair	• a wheelchair user
• deformed	• a person with a disfigurement or visible difference
• the blind, the deaf or the disabled	• blind people, people who are blind, deaf people, people who are deaf, disabled people, people with disabilities