

Writing about people with a disability

It is common for people to struggle to find the right words when they are writing about people with disabilities. With about 20% of the Australian population having a disability, using appropriate language is important.

This tip sheet gives suggestions about language that will be less likely to offend readers or cause unintentional discrimination.

Importantly:

- The accepted terminology in Australia is “**people with a disability**” as opposed to “disabled people”. This puts the emphasis on the person, not the disability.
- Different cultures view disability differently and may not share the common view of disability as a physical or physiological issue.
- Above all, be respectful, polite and considerate. Don't hesitate to ask questions of the person you are writing about.

Terminology

Try saying:	Avoid saying:
✓ Person with a disability, people with disabilities	✗ Disabled person, the disabled, differently abled, special needs
✓ Person with cerebral palsy (or other condition)	✗ Afflicted by cerebral palsy, victim of ..., suffers from...
✓ Person with a physical disability	✗ Crippled, invalid, handicapped, spastic, physically challenged
✓ Person who uses a wheelchair	✗ Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair
✓ Person who is deaf or hard of hearing	✗ Deaf and dumb, deaf mute
✓ Person with a mental illness	✗ Mentally disturbed, mental disability, insane
✓ Accessible parking, accessible toilet etc	✗ Disabled parking, handicapped toilets etc
✓ Person who has schizophrenia	✗ A schizophrenic
✓ Person with an intellectual disability	✗ Retarded, mentally handicapped, mental disability

Evolving language

Language changes over time. Words that were once considered appropriate may now offend some people. This is true in all areas of language, not just when talking or writing about disability.

Additionally, not all people with disabilities feel the same way about all words. Some people prefer to call themselves a “disabled person” as opposed to a “person with a disability”. Some may prefer to use other terms.

The suggestions on this tip sheet reflect the current most popular terms here in Australia.

Emotive language to avoid

Whilst being expressive in writing is okay, using emotive terms and adjectives such as ‘triumphant’, ‘courageous’, ‘brave’, ‘inspiring’, ‘against all odds’, ‘struggling’, ‘a victim of...’, can perpetuate stereotypes and detract from the value of stories being told.

Use words that describe the actions and the outcome that are relevant and factual for that story whilst acknowledging, if necessary but not focusing on the disability.



Where to find more information

Maribyrnong City Council, in partnership with Hobsons Bay and Wyndham City Councils, has produced a booklet titled “Communicating with People with Disabilities”. For free copies of this booklet, please contact your local Council.

Disability Services Queensland has an excellent booklet entitled “A Way with Words”. This can be downloaded at www.disability.qld.gov.au/publications/waywithwords.pdf

Sane Australia provides advice for the media in reporting on mental illness. Visit www.sane.org and click on “Media”.

Office for Disability has a number of other resources. These can be found at www.officefordisability.vic.gov.au

MetroAccess

This tip sheet is an initiative of MetroAccess, which is a partnership between local government and the Department of Human Services in Victoria. This tip sheet was initially developed by Maribyrnong City Council.

MetroAccess aims to build local communities which are more inclusive of people with disabilities.

For more information about MetroAccess, contact your local Council.