

# WORDS MATTER

## Introduction – the social power of language

The social power of language can never be underestimated. The words selected and the context they are used in has a significant impact on how a group of people can be positioned in society. When we consider the attitudes of social norms and the intention of what we are trying to communicate, we can make a world of difference to the lives of the people we are communicating about or with and we can assist in re-educating community about the inclusion of all people in our society.

Inclusive language means keeping your emphasis on the person first without denying or obscuring the reality of the disability.

For example:

By using phrases like '**has disability**' or '**living with disability**'; or

Language such as '**a person with disability**' instead of '**disabled person**' you have moved the focus moves from the disability to the individual.

Appropriate language also positions a person living with disability in an active role rather than a passive one.

For example:

'**wheelchair user**' helps show an active, independent person' rather than '**wheelchair bound**', which conjures up passivity.

Disability has replaced 'handicap' as the more appropriate term.

Remember people are people and disability is as much about society's inability to create inclusive environments as it is about a person's specific disability.

An individual = the person

Impairment = their functioning

Disability = society's barriers

The term 'able-bodied' can imply all people with disabilities lack "able bodies" or the ability to use their bodies well. Some members of community struggle with this term and what it may imply. More inclusive language would be "*a person with disability*" and "*a person without disability*".

### ***Always ask - assumptions cause inaccurate and erroneous reporting.***

According to the 2018 census, at least 18.3% of the population (more than four million Australians) said they had some form of disability.

As the community ages, disabilities and disability issues will become more relevant and newsworthy.

- Many people have hidden or invisible disabilities such as mental health or learning disability, hearing impairment or vision impairment.
- People living with disability are living a life. Disability is not something to fear, ridicule or denigrate.
- Stereotypical depictions of people living with disability stigmatises and/or demeans real people. It is important to understand the 'person first' concept. Depictions of people with disability should be in the same multi-dimensional fashion as anyone else.
- People with disability are people first, just like anyone else.

Never assume how an individual may feel about having disability. Even if you know someone with a similar disability, chances are, your interviewee does not think or feel the same way. It is always safer to ask how he or she feels if this is relevant - and only if this is relevant.

Remember: how people with disability are perceived depends on you.

### **Social model of disability replaces the medical model**

Participation in society is limited only by access to society

The **medical model** prevents people from participating fully in society as 'victims' of conditions.

The **social model** views disability as a set of circumstances which in some way hamper or hinders a person in terms of their ability to carry out day to day activities.

This social model considers access to society to be at the crux of social participation. Disability is not a limitation, rather, participation in society is an issue of design and modification that permits (or otherwise) people with disabilities having complete access to buildings (old and new), recreation, education, employment and health facilitates like any other member of society.

## Disability Etiquette - Respect and inclusion

### Tips when engaging with people with disability

Relax and try and be yourself. It is important to remember that people are all different and will all have their own preferences and needs. If you are unsure, ask respectfully.

Respect people's privacy. It is neither polite or generally necessary to ask people about their disability unless you are having a specific conversation and the person is explaining something to you about their access or communication needs.

Offering assistance: if you think a person with disability needs help or if you want to offer assistance, offer to assist, **then wait until your offer has been accepted before you help**. It is always advisable to ask the person how they require your assistance. Don't just grab someone or their belongings and start helping before they have responded. Even if people do not need help, they will generally appreciate and understand why you asked. Be prepared for a refusal and for some people to look a little 'put out'.

### Things to do

- Sit at the same level as the person you are talking to
- Most importantly, relax when interviewing/talking to a person with disability
- Ask yourself, would this be of interest or a story if the person didn't have disability
- If in doubt, ask.
- Don't be afraid to ask relevant questions
- Common expressions such as "see you later" or "have you heard about..." are acceptable to vision impaired and hearing-impaired people and generally cause no offence, nor would asking a wheelchair user to "go for a walk".

### What not to do

- Never talk to a person with disability through a companion, personal assistant or their interpreter. Treat individuals as individuals. Look at them and talk directly to them.
- Don't call people with disability brave, amazing or inspirational for doing things that other people do every day. Stating someone is brave or inspirational for doing every day activities may be considered insulting.
- Don't focus on the human interest story of someone who is experiencing disability (i.e. how the person has overcome overwhelming odds.) Keep the focus of the actual story rather than the disability.

- Don't assume someone is ill simply because she or he has disability.
- Don't be embarrassed or guilty if you have difficulty understanding the person you are interviewing if they have verbal communication difficulties. The person will probably be used to it and will have developed ways of managing. Tell them you're having trouble.

<b>WHAT NOT TO SAY</b>	<b>REPLACE WITH</b>
Suffers from, victim of	Person with/people with/person living with
Non-disabled	Person with disability/Able-bodied
Wheelchair-bound/confined to a wheelchair/'in a wheelchair'	Wheelchair user
Dwarf, midget	Short stature/short statured person
Spastic	Has cerebral palsy
Victim	No replacement for this term. People with a disability are not victims and must not be portrayed as such.
The Disabled	People with disability
Defective, deformed	Avoid these degrading terms
The Handicapped	Person with <specific disability>
Epileptic	Person with epilepsy
Fit, attack, spell	Seizure
The deaf	Person who is deaf
Deaf and Dumb	Unable to speak
Insane, lunatic, psycho	Person with psychiatric disability or mental illness <or the specific condition>
Retarded	Person with an intellectual disability
Mongol	Person with (has) Down Syndrome

## **DISABILITY IN THE MEDIA & EVERYDAY LIFE**

When you are writing about disability issues or portraying people with disability on television, in print, or in everyday conversation, or when you are talking to a person with disability, keep in mind that people with disability are your equals. Respect their individuality and rights. Relate to a person with disability the same way you would prefer to be treated. Portrayals of people with disability influence how they are regarded by their community.

Policy makers, media, writers and journalists have a valuable and direct line to the public. The media can take leadership in effecting a positive and equal portrayal of people with disability. At heart, disability is a social matter for the entire Australian community.

### **Avoid portraying the experience of people with disability as sensational or abnormal.**

While disability may not be a common experience, it is a normal part of human experience.

### **Credibility**

Appropriate language is an important topic, particularly for those who engage in developing public communications such as journalists, reporters, photographers and camera-operators. It is particularly important for anyone who writes about, talks about, thinks about, and talks to people with disability.

If an article makes strong, valid points, but is not credible to the audience, effectiveness is lost. This is especially true of issues and subjects that relate to disability.

### **Be clear about the purpose of the article**

Report details relevant to your article. Information about a person's medical history is unjustified. Avoid gratuitously emphasising physical differences or adaptive aids and technologies in visual or written treatment unless this is relevant.

If a report is about neighbourhood environmental pollution, and the principle interviewee is a person using a wheelchair, the visual focus should be the person, not the wheelchair.

## Use of photographs and graphics

Photographs always send a message. Photographs support the text of the story or the issues reported.

If a person with disability is photographed and the focus is on their disability or their equipment, this kind of photography might inadvertently devalue the person.

Coverage of people with a disability can often be long on emotion and inspiration, but short on the issue. This demeans the person as well as the story.

## Communicate Fairly

In many contexts it is unnecessary to refer to a person's disability. Yet this aspect of a person is frequently referred to in news items.

When a person with disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human interest story line usually predominates, (i.e. how the individual has overcome overwhelming odds). The focus of the story becomes skewed towards the disability rather than the person or the real issue.

### *Derogatory labelling diminishes and dehumanises people with disability*

Gratuitous emphasis of disability results in the exclusion of other characteristics. This creates the impression that the person referred to is somehow an oddity – not quite an equal member of the community.

### *Aim to write respectful realistic copy of people living with disability.*

One of the hardest worked clichés is of someone succeeding 'in spite of their' disability. People often succeed because of the lesson's disability has taught them, not in spite of their disability. Mostly they just succeed like anyone else.

## Reporting about people with disability fairly means:

Reporting a realistic, ongoing response to life's daily challenges, not a focus on the trauma of personal suffering

Reporting the adequacy or inadequacy of society's response, not focusing the emotive content of disability

Reporting common human interest issues, not excessive emotional coverage

Clear, honest reporting of relevant information.

## Discussions and Interviews

When you interview a person with disability, conduct the interview as you would with anyone else. Keep your questions relevant to the issues or story you are pursuing, as you would with anyone else.

*Consider the person's disability as you would their hair colour or education level. If it's relevant to your story, include it. If it's irrelevant to the story, leave it out.*

Asking a person with disability 'were you born like that?' or 'what happened to you?' can be invasive, especially if there is no logical reason to write about it or even to ask about it. Before asking a question about the person's personal life, consider whether you would put a similar question to any other person.

**Questions about a person's disability must be relevant to the story to be newsworthy.**

## Be inclusive

People with disability drive, vote, work, use childcare and juggle the full range of life's demands like other Australians. Report the view of people with disability in general interest issues such as childcare, public transport, the environment.

For example: report disability sports as you would any other sports. Drop the patronising stories.

## Target the whole community

Despite a market of over four million people with disability in Australia, Australian advertising is oblivious to them.

People with disability in Australia also buy detergent, ice cream cones, shampoo, condoms, underwear, sanitary napkins and cars, but you would never know by watching our TV or reading the ads in our newspapers and magazines. People with disability in Australia might as well be invisible.

## LANGUAGE AND DISABILITY INTERNATIONALLY

### Differences

The understanding and interpretation of Disability Rights and appropriate use of language varies from country to country. What is appropriate in one place is not always appropriate in another. It is important to be aware of possible differences. Some examples are listed below.

### United Kingdom

The term 'the disabled' implies a homogeneous group separate from the rest of society. People with disability are all individuals. In the United Kingdom (U.K) the preferred term is 'disabled people'.

Under the Social Model, as it is interpreted in the UK the term 'people with disabilities' is incorrect as people with disability have impairments. We are people who are disabled by the environment, attitudes, stereotypes etc. The preferred term is disabled people (whereas people with disability would be appropriate in Australia)

There are often similarities between countries, such as wheelchair user, which is the preferred term in both Australia and the U.K.

### The United States of America (USA)

Mobility International USA highlights "The Disability Rights Movement advocates for positive changes in society. These changes include equal rights under the law and equal access to housing and employment. It could also mean improving how people with disabilities are talked about in places like the media or in everyday conversations."

In the USA it is considered appropriate to use words or phrases such as "disabled", "disability", or "people with disabilities" when talking about disability issues. It is considered best to simply ask the people you are with which term they prefer if they have a disability.

### Canada

In Canada, person first language is encouraged as best practice, as is shown by the terminology in a guide produced by The Canadian Association of Broadcasters and Journalists. In it, Canadians with disabilities are like any other Canadian of any other diverse background.



The simple rule of thumb: It's people first, the person comes first. The disability comes second.

So, a hypothetical news story that opens with, 'The rights of the disabled became the focal point of a parliamentary committee today....' becomes... The rights of persons with disabilities became the focal point of a parliamentary committee today.'

## New Zealand

In New Zealand, the encouragement of an inclusive society puts the person first, with the term "disabled people" acceptable. The New Zealand Disability Strategy (2001) differentiates between impairments and disability in society.

Disability is the process which happens when one group of people create barriers by deigning a world only for their way of living, taking no account of the impairment of other people.

In Australia, putting the person first occurs by using the term person followed by the disability.

As the examples show, person first language is often different for each country. In the UK, there is one approach, in the USA another, Canada another and so on.

Because of this, try to remain aware that what is appropriate in one place is not always appropriate in another. Possible differences are not necessarily meant to cause offence.

## USEFUL LINKS AND REFERENCE GUIDELINES

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability 2008

National Disability Strategy (NDS) 2010 – 2020

Disability Inclusion Act 2014 (NSW)

National Disability Inclusion Plan (NDIP) – launched February 2016 – government commitment to ensuring those with disability enjoy the same opportunities and choices as everyone else. It aligns with NDS and obligations under the UNCRPD

Disability Discrimination Act, 1992 and Amendments, 2009 (Commonwealth)

Other Relevant legislation and Standards:

- Carers (Recognition) Act, 2010 (NSW)
- Web Accessibility National Transition Strategy, 2010 (Commonwealth)
- National Arts and Disability Strategy, 2009 (Commonwealth)
- National Standards for Disability Services, revised 2013 (Commonwealth)
- Disability Services Standards, revised 2012 (NSW)
- Anti-Discrimination Act, 1977 (NSW) • The Local Government Act, 1993 (NSW)
- The Local Government (General) Regulation, 2005 (NSW)

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA)

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (Web Guidelines WACG) developed by the World Wide Web Consortium

<https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>

- Media Access Australia - <http://www.mediaaccess.org.au/web>
- Access IQ - <http://www.accessiq.org/>
- Vision Australia - <https://www.visionaustralia.org/business-and-professionals/digital-access-consulting>