Inclusive Language Guide

Contents

Purpose of this guide

Everyone benefits in communities that use supportive and inclusive language.

Inclusive language supports respectful and professional communication between colleagues, stakeholders and clients, some of whom may also have a disability.

You may be involved in activities such as sport, volunteering, arts and culture, charity work, and other community activities. Using inclusive language when participating in these activities ensures that everyone belongs.

Regardless of where you work, it is vital that you communicate with people with disability in a respectful and professional way. This guide outlines how to use language that respects and empowers people with disability in our communities.

A note on language in this guide

Disability is wide-ranging and comes in many forms. We acknowledge that the language around disability is evolving and there is active debate in the community and different preferences about ways to describe disability. We acknowledge the importance of having conversations with individuals about their preferred language and not making assumptions.

It is critical to respect individual preferences. Some people prefer to be referred to as a 'person with disability' and others prefer 'disabled person'. Others prefer the use of language such as 'diverse abilities' rather than disability.

The language used in this guide is not intended to indicate a particular preference and we do not intend to exclude anyone on the basis that their preference differs to the style used.

We recognise that many people's experiences as a person with disability are intersectional and can be shaped by not only their disability but their age, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, intersex status, ethnic origin or race.

The disability community is broad and diverse, and it is important to recognise that not all disability is visible to others. We welcome feedback on the language of disability by contacting feedback@dsdsatsip.qld.gov.au.

Other languages and formats

The Queensland Government is committed to providing accessible services to Queenslanders from all culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. If you need help with interpreting, translations and alternative formats (including large print) please telephone 13 QGOV (13 74 68), free call 1800 512 451 or visit www.qld.gov.au/help/languages.

Understanding inclusive language

What is inclusive language?

Inclusive language is respectful and empowering. It avoids negative or stigmatising terms focusing on the person, their abilities, and their preferences. Using this type of language helps to affirm the dignity and worth of people with disability.

Why is it important?

For many people with disability, language that emphasises strengths and personhood is crucial to a sense of identity and wellbeing. Asking people how they refer to themselves and their disability, and using their preferred terms helps build trust, rapport, and positive relationships. When an individual's preference is unknown, using inclusive language helps create trust and reflects an understanding of the social model of disability.

Inclusive language promotes respect and understanding in the community. Using language that recognises and respects a person's identities and experiences helps create an environment where disabled people feel valued and supported, rather than marginalised or stigmatised.

However, there are situations, such as when applying for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) or in health-related interactions, where medical terminology or technical language may be used to describe a person's functional limitations or diagnosis as well as their strengths and abilities. This may not always align with an individual's disability identity or preferences.

It's important to explain to individuals why this language is may be used such as to determine eligibility criteria or to ensure appropriate referrals can be made. Clear communication about when and why medical or technical language is used helps maintain trust and respect for the individual's identity.

Knowing when and how to use appropriate terminology in different contexts is essential to ensure people feel respected while accessing the supports they need.

The importance of communication

Effective communication is only possible when our message is clear and understood. The tone, clarity, and delivery of our communication can significantly impact how our message is received by others, including people with disability. All communication should be accessible and respectful, as it reflects our commitment to inclusivity and equality for all people.

Accessible communication helps break down barriers and creates an environment where everyone feels valued and understood. It empowers people with disability to engage fully with services and information, promoting autonomy and participation in all aspects of community life.

For more information on how to make your communication accessible, refer to [Appendix 1: Creating accessible communication](#).

The evolution of language

Language, including disability language, continues to evolve as societal attitudes, understanding, and preferences change. Terms that were once considered appropriate may become outdated or even offensive as people's experiences and perspectives shift. It's important to connect with disabled communities, listen to their preferences, and continuously revisit the language we use to ensure it remains respectful and current. By reflecting on how we communicate, we contribute to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone.

Where did inclusive language come from?

The Disability Rights movement

Inclusive language emerged in the mid-20th century alongside the disability and civil rights movements, which advocated for equality and inclusion. The social model of disability was fundamental to this change. This model focuses on how societal barriers create disability, rather than limitations of any one individual.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Australian disability activists worked to challenge negative stereotypes and discriminatory language, transforming how people with disability are described and perceived. The adoption of Person-First Language (PFL) in the 1980s was a key milestone, which emphasised the importance of recognising the individual before their disability (e.g. 'person with cerebral palsy). The introduction of the Australian *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* was another key milestone as it became illegal to discriminate against individuals with disability in areas such as employment, education, and access to services. This legislation is based on the [United Nations Convention On The Rights Of People With Disabilities.](#)

More recently, some communities have begun to embrace identity-first language, where disability is seen as a core part of identity (e.g. 'autistic person'). This reflects an ongoing debate within disability communities about the most

respectful way to discuss disability. For more information about person-first vs. identity-first language, see [Appendix 2: Identity-first vs person-first language.](#)

Language continues to evolve as leaders in the disability rights movement push for greater recognition of individual preferences and the diversity of experiences among people with disability.

The disability rights movement has led to laws and policies that support inclusion and accessibility, and has shifted the focus from curing disability to creating a society that accommodates everyone.

Language for different disabilities

People with different disabilities have unique experiences, perspectives and needs, and use different language. Inclusive language reflects these differences and ensures that it is respectful, empowering, and accurate for each group. Several reasons why different disabilities prefer different language include:

- **Cultural identity:** Some disability communities, such as the neurodiverse and d/Deaf communities, view their disability as a part of their cultural identity rather than a medical condition. These groups work to foster and emphasise pride in their communities. For example, 'Deaf' (uppercase) is appropriate for people in the Deaf community who use Auslan as their first language

but not all people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing use Auslan or identify this way.

- **Historical stigma:** Certain terms have been used in a derogatory manner and have been adopted into language speech over many centuries. Terms such as 'dumb,' 'lame', 'crazy' or phrases like 'turn a blind eye' or 'fallen on deaf ears' are embedded in everyday language. But these terms can be considered microaggressions which cause lasting harm for people with disability. It's up to each of us to rethink the words we use and make conscious choices towards more inclusive and respectful terminology.

- **Preferences within communities:** Each disability community may have its own set of preferences, everyday language and slang.

- **Person-first vs identity-first language:** Some people prefer person-first language (e.g. 'person with low vision') to emphasise that they are not defined by their disability, while others prefer identity-first language (e.g. 'Blind person') to emphasise pride in their community. Many autistic people prefer identity-first language, e.g. 'autistic person' instead of 'person with autism'. However, some parents may prefer person-first when referring to their child who has autism. It is always best to ask the individual which language they prefer. See [Appendix 1](#) for more

information about person-first vs identity-first language.

Examples of inclusive language

- Use 'is autistic' or 'has autism' instead of 'suffers from autism'.

- Use 'wheelchair user' instead of 'wheelchair-bound'.

- Use 'lives with mental illness or 'mental health challenges' instead of 'mentally ill'.

Strengths-based versus deficit-based language

Strengths-based language

Strengths-based language, emphasises what a person can do, their abilities, and their potential. It is empowering and aligns with a more holistic view of the individual.

Examples of strengths-based language

- 'The client is Blind and uses screen reading software at work.'

- 'The stakeholder has an intellectual disability and prefers Easy Read documentation.'

- 'Mr Smith communicates his preferences through an augmented communication device and Key Word Signing.'

Deficit-based language

Deficit-based language focuses on what a person cannot do and often uses medical or clinical terms. This language focuses on describing and understanding functional limitations of people accessing support services, during medical assessments and to demonstrate the functional impact of a disability.

Examples of deficit-based language

- 'The client has a permanent vision impairment and needs a cane.'

- 'The stakeholder has Down Syndrome and lives in supported accommodation.'

- 'Mr Smith is non-verbal.'

When to use strengths-based and deficit-based language

- **Strengths-based:** Use this when engaging directly with a person with disability, in advocacy, and in settings where the focus is on empowerment and self-determination. This is the preferred approach.

- **Deficit-based:** Use when documenting for medical assessments, reports, and when detailing the functional impact of a disability for example, when discussing NDIS applications, health and safety, or other supports and services. However, there is no reason to

not include strength-based perspectives when using deficit language. For example, 'Jack has Down Syndrome, has support from family, a part-time job, and lives independently in supported accommodation'.

Cultural safety

A culturally safe environment is one where people can be themselves, are respected and valued for who they are, and without fear of being discriminated against or marginalised. In the context of disability, cultural safety means creating an environment where people with disability feel understood, supported, and free from bias or judgement. This involves recognising that language plays a powerful role in shaping culture and interpersonal dynamics.

When discussing disability it is important to be aware of how language can affirm or undermine a person's identity and experience. Using respectful, person-centred language can contribute to a culture of inclusion, while deficit-based or inappropriate language can create feelings of exclusion, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and erode trust.

Culturally safe environments for people with disability:

- **Use language that respects individual preferences and identities,** e.g., person-first vs identify-first language, acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and/or use of preferred personal pronouns.

- **Encourage open communication** about how clients or colleagues wish to refer to their disability. These preferences may change over time.

- **Avoid making assumptions** about people's abilities or needs.

- **Promote inclusive environments** where everyone feels comfortable raising concerns about language or other aspects of cultural safety.

By promoting cultural safety for all people, we ensure that everyone feels empowered, respected, and supported.

Avoid euphemisms

It is important to avoid euphemisms when referring to people with disability, as these terms can be patronising or dismissive. Euphemisms, like 'differently abled' or 'special needs', often obscure the reality of a person's experience and may imply that you are avoiding the topic of disability.

Using clear, direct language that respects people's preferences helps to promote understanding and avoids reinforcing stigma or discomfort around disability. Using proper names allows for more respectful and meaningful communication.

Sensitive communication with diverse cultural backgrounds

Cultural beliefs and attitudes towards disability can vary significantly, which impacts how individuals perceive their disability and the support they seek.

When communicating with stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds, consider the following:

- **Respect individual perspectives:** Recognise that individuals have unique views about their disability based on their cultural and personal experiences.

- **Be open to learning:** Ask questions and listen to understand a person's cultural context.

- **Avoid assumptions:** Do not assume that all individuals from a particular cultural background share the same beliefs or attitudes about disability.

- **Culturally relevant language:** Use language that is respectful and acknowledges cultural differences while being inclusive. For example, a person may choose to include multiple identities such as First Nations, disabled person, or queer wheelchair user to describe themselves.

- **Provide language support:** Ask people if they need information in other languages or sign languages through certified interpreters and translators.

Five inclusive language tips

Below are five inclusive language tips you can adopt in your practice.

1. **Language matters:** recognise the impact of language on identity and dignity. Use respectful language when speaking to or about people with disability.

2. **Ask for preferences:** ask people what language they would like you to use.

3. **Stay informed and connected:** keep up to date with changes in language and terminology. Engage with disability communities to understand their preferences and perspectives.

4. **Avoid euphemisms:** Use clear, direct language that accurately reflects strengths-based language. Do not use vague or euphemistic terms (e.g. "differently abled).

5. **Provide information in different formats:** People access information in many ways — offer alternative formats so more people can be included.

Conclusion

The use of inclusive language is vital to create respectful and supportive environments for everyone. By understanding the nuances of language and prioritising individual preferences,

we can promote dignity and empowerment for all individuals and contribute to a more inclusive society.

References

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- Even Grounds, *Describing yourself during meetings,* https://evengrounds.com/describing-yourself-during-meetings/

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Appendix 1: Identity-first vs. person-first language

Understanding the difference

When discussing disability, there are two primary approaches to language that individuals might prefer: **identity-first** language and **person-first** language. Each approach reflects a unique perspective on how disability is viewed and how individuals want to be identified.

Identity-first language

- **What it is:** Identity-first language places the disability-related identity before the person, emphasising that the disability is a core part of who the individual is. For example, 'autistic person', 'disabled person', or 'd/Deaf person' are examples of identity-first language.

- **Why some people prefer it:** Many individuals who use identity-first language are proud of their disability and see it as part of their identity. For these people, disability is not something negative that needs to be separated from a person's identity, it is a fundamental part of their identity. This perspective in the d/Deaf and autistic communities, where disability is viewed as a natural and positive part of human diversity.

Autism isn't something a person has, or a shell that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism.

Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colours every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence.

It is not possible to separate the autism from the person — and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with.

Jim Sinclair, Autism Activist

Person-first language

- **What it is:** Person-first language puts the person before the disability, emphasising that the individual is more than their disability. Examples include 'person with autism', 'person with a disability', or 'person who is d/Deaf'.

- **Why some people prefer it:** Advocates of person-first language believe it is important to recognise the individual first, rather than defining people by their disability. This approach combats the dehumanisation and stigma that has historically been associated with disability. By putting the person first, this language

seeks to emphasise that a disability is just one characteristic of a person, not their defining feature.

Why people have different preferences

Cultural and community perspectives

Identity and community

People's preferences are influenced by their culture and the communities they belong to. For example, within d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities, the use of 'Deaf person' is preferred because being Deaf is seen as a cultural identity associated with using Auslan as their primary language. Other deaf or hard-of-hearing people may refer to themselves in this way. For medical purposes, 'hearing loss or impairment' may be used. Similarly, many individuals in the autistic community prefer 'autistic person' as they see autism as a core part of their identity that shapes their experiences and worldview.

Historical context

Person-first language was developed by the disability rights movement to push back against negative stereotypes. However, as disability pride and the neurodiversity movements gained momentum, some people have moved towards identity-first language as a way to reject the notion

that disability is something to be minimised or separated from the self.

Personal choice

Individual preferences

The choice between identity-first and person-first language comes down to personal preference. Individuals who prefer person-first language feel it reflects the full scope of who they are. Others may prefer identity-first language because they see their disability as a positive part of their identity.

Respecting preferences

It is important to respect the preferences of individuals. This means asking people how they prefer to be described and using these preferences in all communications.

Navigating language

It is important to not assume someone's preferences. Below are some tips for navigating how to identify, accommodate and respect individual preferences.

- **Ask first:** When possible, ask people what their preferences are. This shows respect for the person's identity and autonomy.

- **Context matters:** In some cases, certain settings or documents may require a specific type of language. For example, diagnostic reports or assessments often use person-first language, while informal interactions are more flexible.

- **Flexibility and sensitivity:** Be prepared to adjust your language based on the context and preferences of the people you are communicating with. Your top priority is to ensure that all language used is respectful and aligns with the individual's sense of identity.

Examples of identity-first vs. person-first language

Identity-first language	Person-first language
Autistic person	Person with autism
Disabled person	Person with a disability
d/Deaf person	Person who is d/Deaf

| Blind person | Person who is blind, person with low vision |

Both identity-first and person-first language are important. Each preference reflects the different values and perspectives on disability. By understanding these differences and respecting individual preferences, you can contribute to a more inclusive and empowering environment for everyone.

Appendix 2: Creating accessible communication

There are different types of accessibility that should be considered when communicating with people with disability.

Cognitive accessibility

Easy English or Easy Read versions of documents use simple language and visual aids to help people with intellectual or cognitive disabilities understand complex information.

Visual accessibility

Ensure documents meet accessibility standards for people who are Blind or have low vision. This includes:

- using accessible fonts and ensuring all fonts are large enough for people with low vision to read

- use high-contrast colours in documents and images

- ensure all images and tables have descriptive alt-text

- for screen reader compatibility, use proper headings and check accessibility through tools like Microsoft Word accessibility checker.

Accessible presentations

Speakers

When first speaking, speakers should give a brief visual description of themselves. This should include information each speaker is comfortable sharing. They should not feel pressured into sharing information they are not comfortable talking about, which can include age, gender, background, etc.

Speakers should ensure that any use of humour doesn't make anyone feel excluded. For example, making a joke about their appearance that only sighted people would understand is a joke, such as saying they had 'thick wavy black hair' when they had no hair would be inappropriate. A good example, if the speaker felt comfortable sharing this information, would be: "Hi. My name is Tallulah. I'm a Caucasian woman in my early thirties, with a nose ring and long, blonde hair. I am wearing a green top, brown skirt and boots. I have trans flag and rainbow pride badges on my lanyard today."

It is also recommended for the speaker to identify themselves each time they speak. For example, "It's Tallulah here. Let's go onto the next category..."

Visual presentations

Information presented on slides should also be spoken to ensure all information is recorded or captured by live captioning providers. This will help people who are blind or

vision impaired and people who are watching on smaller screens who cannot see the detail.

Make sure information on slides is clear and has good colour contrast. Large black text on a white screen is best practice. Describe pictures, graphs, or tables used on slides as part of the presentation. Where possible, provide accessible copies of slides to participants in advance.

Any music or additional audio should be played at an appropriate volume and clarity, including for live and online listeners.

Accessible events

It is important to make people with disability feel included and welcome in any type of event or interaction. This includes making sure they have accessible means of communicating and engaging with presentations and events.

There are many simple tips, which you can find in the Queensland Government's *Accessible Events Guide*. A few quick suggestions are:

- consider Auslan interpreting, captioning and audio description

- provide agendas and meeting or event materials to participants beforehand, so people can know what to expect and fully participate on the day

- reminders and calendar invites are useful to help people plan ahead

- consider whether group rules, expectations and etiquette are required to help people feel safe and included. For example, some people like to know when breaks will occur and what the finish time will be. For others, knowing it's okay to stand up, fidget or move about is essential to feeling relaxed and being able to think, focus, concentrate and participate.