



# FACT SHEET

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## WRITING ABOUT DISABLED PEOPLE

Language is very important but use of language varies from decade to decade. The language we use is the language used by the Disabled People's movement; it is not language as defined by GLAD. You will find wide variation of usage, even amongst disabled people. But the language we are saying should NOT be used is mainly used by government departments, local authorities, organisations FOR disabled people and most non-disabled people.

Disabled people try to define disability in terms of the social model and within this language is crucial. An understanding of the social model will lead to greater understanding of the above language

The Social Model of Disability is used by the majority of organisations OF disabled people. We believe that it is society's physical, sensory, attitudinal, legal and behavioural barriers which make us disabled, it is not our particular medical conditions or impairments. Society has also chosen language which is not what those of us in the Disabled People's Movement would generally use.

The guidelines in this factsheet will help you to make better choices in terms of language and portrayal of disabled people.

### **General guidelines**

**Do not focus on impairments/conditions** unless it is crucial to the document. Try not to write tear-jerking stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injuries. It is far better to focus on the issues or barriers which affect the quality of life of disabled people such as accessible transport, accessible housing, affordable healthcare, employment opportunities and discrimination.

**Do not portray successful disabled people as superhuman.** The public may like stories about super-achievers and wheelchair users scaling mountain tops for example, but portraying disabled people in this way raises the false expectation that all disabled people should achieve this level.

**Do not sensationalise a disabled person** by using phrases like ‘afflicted with’, ‘suffers from’, ‘victim of’, ‘crippled with’ and so on. Use phrases such as ‘person who has arthritis’ or ‘woman who has cystic fibrosis’ instead.

**Do not use generic labels** for groups of disabled people, such as ‘the deaf’, ‘the blind’ or ‘the disabled’. Try to emphasise the person not the impairment and say things like ‘person who is deaf’, ‘person who is blind’ and ‘disabled person’ instead.

Try to focus on the individual and not on their particular impairment or condition. Say things like ‘children who are blind’ rather than ‘blind children’ or ‘woman with epilepsy’ rather than ‘epileptic woman’.

**Do not use emotional descriptions** such as ‘unfortunate’, ‘pitiful’, ‘mad’, ‘psycho’, ‘stupid’, ‘mental’, ‘handicapped’ etc. These are offensive.

**Do not use euphemisms** to describe disabled people. Phrases such as ‘mentally incompetent’, ‘mentally deficient’, ‘physically incapacitated’ and ‘visually challenged’ are considered to be condescending by disabled people.

Never refer to a disabled person as a patient unless you are discussing their relationship with their doctor.

**The following list of words and phrases are preferred words when writing about disabled people.**

|                                   |            |   |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---|
| Disabled people                   | <b>Not</b> | The disabled<br>The handicapped<br>People with disabilities                             |
| Non-disabled person               | <b>Not</b> | Normal<br>Able-bodied<br>Healthy  |
| Person with learning difficulties | <b>Not</b> | Mentally handicapped<br>Retarded<br>Thick / Stupid<br>Person with learning disabilities |

|   |            |                         |
|---|------------|-------------------------|
| Blind person  | <b>Not</b> | The blind               |
| Visually impaired person                                |            |                         |
| Partially sighted person                                |            |                         |
| Deaf person   | <b>Not</b> | The deaf                |
| The Deaf community                                      |            | Deaf and dumb           |
| Hard of hearing, partially deaf                         |            |                         |
| Hearing impaired  |            |                         |
| Person with epilepsy                                    | <b>Not</b> | Epileptic               |
| Mental health system user/mental health system survivor | <b>Not</b> | Mentally ill            |
| Person with mental health impairment                    |            | Mad                     |
|   |            | Dangerous schizophrenic |
|   |            | Mentally handicapped    |
| Wheelchair user   | <b>Not</b> | Wheelchair bound        |
|   |            | The wheelchair          |
| Physically disabled person                              | <b>Not</b> | Cripple                 |
| Person with physical impairment                         |            |                         |
| Woman/man with sickle cell                              | <b>Not</b> | Sickle cell sufferer    |
| HIV positive  | <b>Not</b> | AIDS carrier            |
| Person living with HIV                                  |            |                         |
| Neurodiverse person                                     | <b>Not</b> | Stupid                  |
| Person with arthritis                                   | <b>Not</b> | Crippled with arthritis |
|   |            | Arthritic               |
| Person with Cerebral Palsy                              | <b>Not</b> | Spastic                 |

|   |            |                                  |
|---|------------|----------------------------------|
| Person with dyslexia                          | <b>Not</b> | Wordblind                        |
| Dyslexic person                               |            | Can't spell                      |
| Person with dyspraxia                         |            | Clumsy                           |
| Person with a specific learning difficulty    |            |                                  |
| Person with a disfigurement                   | <b>Not</b> | Disfigured person                |
|   |            | Facially abnormal                |
|   |            | Facially deformed                |
|   |            | Burns victim                     |
|   |            | Gross disfigurement              |
|   |            | Horrendous scarring              |
|   |            | Horrific disfigurement           |
| Unaware                                       | <b>Not</b> | Blind to the truth               |
| Does not understand the information           |            | Stupid                           |
| Does not listen                               |            | Deaf to reason                   |
| Accessible parking space                      | <b>Not</b> | Disabled parking space           |
| Blue Badge holders parking space              |            |                                  |
| Accessible toilets                            | <b>Not</b> | Disabled toilets                 |
| Accessible entrance                           | <b>Not</b> | Disabled entrance                |
| Level/ramped entrance                         |            |                                  |
| Parking permits for disabled peoples' section | <b>Not</b> | Disabled parking permits section |
| Blue Badge permits<br>Accessible housing      | <b>Not</b> | Disabled housing                 |
| Person with Down's syndrome                   | <b>Not</b> | Mongol                           |
|   |            | Spastic                          |
| Personal assistant                            | <b>Not</b> | Carer                            |

## **The Social Model of Disability**

GLAD publishes a document called “**Reclaiming the Social Model of Disability – Conference Report**” which is free with a 27p SAE.

For further examples of good writing about disabled people, see these GLAD publications:

**London Disability News** – GLAD’s regular monthly magazine

**Boadicea** – A bi-monthly national disabled women’s magazine

**Count Us In Newsletter** – A quarterly newsletter for Black and Minority Ethnic disabled people

**Common Agenda Newsletter** – A quarterly news letter for mental health system user/survivors

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## **Useful Sources of Further Information**

The following organisations publish CD-Roms which contain easily recognised illustrations for use in word and picture format documents. CHANGE produces the ‘CHANGE Picture Bank’ and People First produce ‘Access First’.

**Unity Business Centre**  
**Units 19 & 20**  
**26 Roundhay Road**  
**Leeds**  
**LS7 1AB**

**Telephone: 0113 243 0202**

**Fax: 0113 243 0220**

**Textphone: 0113 243 2225**

**E-mail: [changepeople@btconnect.com](mailto:changepeople@btconnect.com)**

**Website: [www.changepeople.co.uk](http://www.changepeople.co.uk)**

**People First**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Floor**  
**299 Kentish Town Road**  
**London NW5 2TJ**

**Telephone: 020 7485 6660**

**Website: [www.peoplefirstltd.com](http://www.peoplefirstltd.com)**

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## **Plain English Campaign**

This website gives lots of useful tips. The one to look at is 'How to write in plain English', designed as a starting point for anyone interested in learning the tricks of clear writing.

**[www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)**