

# Language & Disability Identity

“ Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better. ~Maya Angelou

## Ableist Language

In the US and across the world, “disability” is considered a taboo subject or one of pity. Disabled individuals strive to be considered equal and have the opportunity self-autonomy. This includes language which significantly impacts in how they identify, and how they are identified in society.

Language is ever-evolving and it's important to understand that certain phrasing and terms are outdated or considered offensive based on the etymology of their meanings.

Example: *“Handicapped” has a connotation of begging and charity rather than earning and supporting one’s self.*

*“Special needs” can infer that a disabled person’s needs are “extra” or “optional” and not essential or need to be accessible.*

Euphemisms like “handicapable” and “disAbility” (a stylized ‘A’ that is capitalized) are sometimes considered dismissive of the disability experience and an infantilization of disabled people.

**Words have power  
Use them wisely**



## Person First vs. Identity First Language

History is filled with oppressive laws and societal ideas about the inherent “sin,” of disability either as a punishment for some crime against man, nature, or deity.

Disability history has been full of ridicule, pity, and violence, with some states enforcing so-called “ugly laws” to keep disabled people hidden. Some laws supported eugenics efforts to forcibly sterilize individuals and prevent reproduction as “...three generations of imbeciles is enough...” (Buck v. Bell)

Because these laws and stigma are still active and prevalent, disabled activists have called for a use in “identity first” language to highlight disability as an integral, crucial part of one’s identity. However, others view “person first” language as appropriate as it highlights the individual over their identity.

Example: *Autistic is an example of identity first language, but “person with autism” is an example of of person first language.*

*The Office for Disability Justice models “identity first” language, but encourages people to use the language they prefer.*

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) offer a reference library with [more info.](#)



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