

Project PACE
Faculty Resources for Teaching Students with Disabilities
Language Use and People With Disabilities



People with disabilities are people first—not the disability. It is not appropriate to say "an epileptic" or "a cripple." Instead, use language that emphasizes the person first. Say "a person who has epilepsy" or "a person with a physical disability." The term "handicap" is no longer considered acceptable because by definition, "a handicap" is a condition imposed by the environment. A person who uses a wheelchair, for example, has a physical condition or disability, but may be very mobile and not limited by this disability. The person is only limited when he or she encounters buildings or facilities that are not accessible.

Here are some examples of appropriate and inappropriate references to people with disabilities.

Language that is encouraged:

- Person with a disability
- Person who has... (example: a person who has arthritis)
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Non-disabled
- Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
- Person with a mental illness or a psychological disability
- Person with epilepsy, seizures
- Person with mental retardation, person with a developmental disability

Language to avoid:

- Cripple, handicap, invalid, the disabled, the blind
- Victim of, stricken with, afflicted with
- Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
- Normal
- Deaf-mute, mute, deaf and dumb
- Crazy, insane, deranged
- Fits, spastic, epileptic
- Retard, imbecile, moron, slow