The Language of Disability: Do's & Don'ts

DON'T USE	DO USE
Wheelchair-bound/confined to/suffers from/afflicted with/crippled by/victim of	Wheelchair user/uses a wheelchair
The disabled/the blind/the deaf	These terms make assumptions about how the disabled person feels about his or her disability. Use "has" and the name of condition (e.g., has cerebral palsy, has paraplegia, etc.) Always use as an adjective rather than a noun (e.g., Disabled person, blind filmmaker, deaf man or woman)
Deaf vs Deaf culture	Many Deaf individuals do not identify as having a disability, but rather belonging to a distinct culture with its own language. This is known as Deaf culture. Use Deaf when referring to Deaf people or Deaf culture. Use deaf when referring to the condition of deafness
Retarded (e.g., mentally retarded)	Use intellectual disability; cognitive disability; developmental disability (when using these terms, however, it is important to understand the distinction among them.
Handicapped (handicap)	In general: If you're not writing about sports, don't use it! Use disability, disabled person, person with a disability.
Handicapped parking/restroom/etc.	Use accessible parking, restroom, etc.
Midget/dwarf	Use little person (Dwarf is acceptable only if the person actually has dwarfism.) Keep in mind: Anyone with dwarfism is a little person, but every little person is not a dwarf.
Deaf-mute/deaf and dumb/hearing-impaired	Always use Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing.

Physically challenged/differently abled	Avoid ableist, offensive, outdated or saccharine terms and euphemisms. Use identify-first language (e.g., disabled sportscaster) or person-first language (e.g., person with a disability).
Overcoming/inspiring/brave/courageous	Avoid patronizing and condescending descriptives. Describes the person's accomplishments without value judgment or interpretation.
Special / Special needs	**NEVER** use when referring to disabled people. Note: "Special needs" is widely used in education and by parents of disabled children, but is offensive to many in the disability community, advocates and activists.

NOTE: The terms in the left column were coined by nondisabled people. The terms on the right were coined by disabled activists and advocates and are preferred by the majority of the disability community. These terms should be adopted by your organization and used for all materials, programs, and events, both internal and outward-facing. However, when interacting with an individual, always defer to the individual's personal preference.