



Arts Access Australia

AAA Advice : Disability Language

The language of disability changes quickly and different terms are used within and outside of Australia. It can be political, it can be very personal and can sometimes be quite confusing.

But don't panic! If you have good intentions and treat everyone with respect, you'll get by. Here's a few tips to help you on your way...

1. Definition of Disability

When we say we work with 'people with disability', we mean anyone with sensory or physical impairments, hidden impairments, learning disabilities or mental health conditions.

2. The Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability makes a distinction between impairments (the condition, illness or loss/lack of function) and disability (barriers and discrimination).

So we use the term 'disability' to refer to barriers, rather than medical conditions or impairments. The Social Model looks at the environment instead of individuals, and gives us all power over things we can change.

3. 'People with disability' (vs.) 'Disabled people'

AAA uses and recommends as best practice the use of the term 'people with disability.'

This is because we use the word 'disability' in its Social Model context, which means that someone has been disabled by barriers or discrimination, not by their impairment/s.

The term comes from a position of putting the person first and is the one most commonly used in Australia. It is also similar to the term used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Other terms commonly used in Australia include: 'disabled people', 'people experiencing disability' and 'people living with disability'. All of these also use the words 'disabled' or 'disability' to refer to barriers instead of impairments.

But although they seem very similar, we do not use the terms 'person with a disability' or 'person with disabilities', because these refer to impairments rather than barriers.

4. D/deaf?

Many people who use sign-language as their first language identify as a cultural and linguistic minority, not as people with disability. We recognize and value the culture and language of the deaf community. But we use the term 'people with disability' to include deaf people too.

This is because we use the word 'disability' in its Social Model context: barriers, not impairments. And because people who use Auslan (Australian sign language) as their first language tend to experience barriers too (like discrimination or lack of access).

5. Arts and Disability (vs.) 'Disability Arts'

Disability Art is artwork made by people with disability that comes from an experience of being disabled and that has references to disability. Not all artists with disability make work about this experience, and not all choose to identify with the Disability Art movement.

Disability Arts is a genre and an important movement in contemporary art history (just like surrealism or feminist art).

Arts and Disability is a much bigger field that includes people with disability in all areas of the arts. The Disability Arts movement is a small but important part of this.

6. What to say

Remember the first rule about disability language: don't panic! What you say isn't as important as making the effort to say it. But here's a few examples of words we recommend:

Words we recommend...	Words we don't recommend...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• people / person with disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• person with a disability• person with disabilities• differently abled / diffability• 'the' Disabled• handicapped• physically challenged• someone who can't [hear, speak, walk, etc]
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• people / person without disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• non-disabled person• able bodied person• normal
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• wheelchair user	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• wheelchair bound• bound / confined to a wheelchair
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blind person / people• visually impaired person / people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the Blind• person without sight

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deaf person / people • Auslan user • hard of hearing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Deaf • deaf and dumb
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning disability • learning difficulty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retarded / retard • special needs • slow learner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • person of small stature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • midget • dwarf
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental health issues / condition • mental health service user • mental health system survivor (or just “survivor”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental health problems • mental • mentally ill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal assistant / PA • support worker • access assistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carer (unless a person with disability uses the term themselves)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accessible toilet • adapted toilet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disabled toilet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accessible parking • blue badge parking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disabled parking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has • experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • suffers from • afflicted with
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how can we help? • what can we do to [...]? • do you have any access requirements? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what’s your problem? • what’s wrong with you? • do you have a disability?

And here’s some words we never, ever use...

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • victim • less fortunate / unfortunate • slow / moron / mongol • mad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • backward • freak • spastic / spaz • loony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cripple / crip <p>(even if some people with disability use this term about themselves)</p>
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8. How to say it...

Wherever possible, talk about the person, not the impairment. Use people's names.

Never ask anyone what his or her impairment is. The only thing you need to know is what their access requirements are. Anything else is their own personal business.

If you want to target people with disability in particular, ask everybody whether they identify as a person with disability or whether they face barriers as a result of their impairments. Ask everybody about their access requirements to make sure your services are accessible to all.

Try not to use impairment-specific language and to respect the language that people use about themselves. For example, we use the term 'people with disability' to describe who we work with but try to use the terms 'person', 'artist' or 'artswoker' about individuals. We prefer not to use the term 'disability artist' unless an artist wants to make that point in their work.

Try to use positive language to describe people with disability and positive images of people with disability actively engaging with your venue or work.

9. Access: clear and simple

Here's some easy ways to make everything you do more accessible:

- Use Plain English, short words and simple language.
- Offer to make all your information available in accessible formats and your events accessible for everyone.
- Use a sans serif font (like this one) in at least 12-point (or 20-point for large print). Don't use *italics* or ALL CAPS.
- Make it possible for people to contact you however works best for them: phone, text message, email, by post, on Skype or in person.
- Make sure your staff are trained and disability aware. Why not learn the Auslan sign for 'welcome' and use it at the start of all your meetings and events?

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Please let us know if you'd like this information in another format.