Doing it right starts with saying it right. Unfortunately, many of the ways we talk about disability are full of hidden, disempowering biases. Here’s a quick guide to some terms you should use, some you should never use, and some that depend on the context. Of course, this is just a start — disability language is complex and always evolving, and we’re here to help ensure that disability is portrayed authentically in all your content.

**DO SAY**

- **WHEELCHAIR USER**: Some people with mobility disabilities use wheelchairs to get around. “Wheelchair user” recognizes the disabled person’s agency. Never use “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair bound,” — these terms are inaccurate and offensive to many wheelchair users.

- **DISABILITY, DISABLED**: “Person with a disability” and “disabled person” are both commonly-accepted constructions. Though it is best to use a person-first construction like “people with disabilities” on first use, “disabled” or a more specific term like “wheelchair user” can be safely used on second reference or when person-first constructions are too awkward. “People with disabilities who vote” could be replaced with “disabled voters.” Never use disabled as a noun: “the disabled.”

- **ADAPTIVE**: Use when describing products, programs or services that are adapted to be used by people with a wide range of functional abilities: “adaptive fitness classes” or “adaptive keyboard.”

**DON’T SAY**

- **SUFFER, VICTIM**: Never use these words when referring to a person’s disability, as it’s an assumption that people suffer, and it is disempowering to call someone a victim. “Survive” can often be used in place of these terms. “Dan survived a traumatic brain injury in 2016.”

- **SPECIAL, DIFFERENTLY-ABLED**: Euphemisms like these are often offensive and assume that people cannot deal directly with their disabilities. When describing someone’s disability, use neutral, matter-of-fact language. “Sheila has multiple sclerosis and uses a scooter for mobility.”

- **ABLE-BODIED, NORMAL**: Don’t use these terms — they imply that disability is abnormal, or less-than. If you need to specify, use “nondisabled” or “people/person without disabilities.”

**SOMETIMES**

- **PATIENT**: Only use “patient” when the subject is in a hospital or clinical setting or their relationship with a doctor is being discussed. Referring to people as patients in non-clinical settings reinforces the stereotype that disability is something to be cured or fixed.

- **INSPIRATION**: Inspiration and inspiring are overused terms when describing the activities of people with disabilities. When you want to use one of these terms, stop and ask yourself, would this be inspiring if it were a nondisabled person doing it? Never use inspirational terms in reference to activities — like holding steady employment, raising a family or completing a local 5k — that people commonly do.

For more information on Disability Focused Editorial Content Review or Disability Etiquette Training consulting services, please contact AJ Assaadi, aassaadi@unitedspinal.org