

Language Matters:

A Primer for Neuroinclusive Design

Version 1 | October 2025

Perkins&Will



Language Matters.

Language is closely tied to an individual's identity. It can help shape how we portray empathy, understanding, and respect. This becomes a powerful design tool toward centering the community at the heart of our design.

We use the term "**neuroinclusion**" as an expression of an environment that supports the vast breath of neurocognitive abilities within our population. In this context the term alludes to the built environment, however other systems such as technology, communication, and media work together to create a neuroinclusive environment.

Person-first language and **identity-first language** have evolved as two distinct approaches for disabled and neurodivergent individuals to identify themselves and communities. The language we use should always be shaped by people's preferences, so don't be shy and just ask!

Person-first language¹

("person with disabilities")

Aims to prioritize the individual and avoids defining them solely by their challenges.

Advocates of person-first language argue that it emphasizes the person before their condition or disability. People who prefer to use person-first language argue that it helps reduce stigma and promotes the idea that a person's condition is just one aspect of their identity, not the defining characteristic².

Examples:

- Person with autism
- An individual who is neurodivergent
- A female lawyer with ADHD
- Tom with dyspraxia uses a wheelchair.

Identity-first language

("disabled person")

Places the condition or disability before the person. People who prefer this approach argue that their disability is an integral part of their identity, like gender or race, and should be embraced with pride, rather than separated from their personhood. It is not an undesirable characteristic that they want to be rid of, rather something that should be embodied.

Examples:

- An autistic person
- A neurodivergent individual
- She has ADHD and works as a lawyer
- A wheelchair user with dyspraxia who's name is Tom

Some people will move between these perspectives depending on context, community or personal experiences. Some cultures, disability communities, and individuals have strong preference, so it's always best to follow the language they use for themselves.

What Can You Do?

Designing for neurodiversity requires a balancing of available options and choices. It is important to remember that specific neurodivergent identity such as Autism and Dyslexia can co-occur, resulting in a unique pattern of experience and ability. Approaching neurodivergence from a diagnosis and labeling perspective can create a focus on the challenges rather than the strengths of individuals with neurodivergence. A person-centered approach is required in design by tailoring strategies to the individual, occupant, or user.

Conscientiously address stigma and question bias.

Language is the first part of addressing historical, deeply embedded stigma. While federal agencies and governing bodies may use person-first language, it is important to advocate for the communities' preferred language. Communities then feel respected and dignified in ongoing conversations³, that are ideally happening in the beginning sequences of design to maximize inclusion of different groups and peoples into design. It is the allies' responsibility to learn and practice anti-ableist language - the ways we speak to or about people with disabilities. The National Education Association states that, *"The burden is on allies to relearn language practices rather than on people with disabilities to accept ablist language use."*¹⁴

Key Takeaway

Always Ask: Some individuals may prefer person-first language, while others may embrace identity-first language. Designers should ask stakeholders and users about their preferred language and respect their choices.

Our perception of the term "disabled" is heavily influenced by the medicalized model of disability which implies that something is "wrong" with a person because they don't conform to the "norm". Similarly being neurodivergent has faced societal biases that have negatively affected how people are perceived.

Being neurodivergent is not...

- an illness or a problem
- being "special"
- a bad word
- something people suffer from or are stricken by
- always relevant to describing a person
- an innate vulnerability
- something people must "overcome"
- a limit on human potential or dignity
- limiting success or productivity
- a name
- something to be joked about



A group of people is neurodiverse.

Neurodiversity is the human mind's experience. A multiplicity of difference rather than deficit. It is biological fact rather than an opinion, stance, or belief. A group is considered neurodiverse when it includes individuals with **varying neurological differences**. Since each individual has a unique set of neurocognitive abilities, any size group of people can be considered neurodiverse.⁵ Neurodiversity encompasses the full range of cognitive styles and abilities, acknowledging that neurological functioning can **manifest in diverse ways**.



An individual is neurodivergent or neurotypical.

Neurodivergent can be described as someone who's cognitive profile diverges from a **societal, pre-established cognitive norm** through variations in cognitive processing, social interaction, or sensory perception.⁶ This mythical norm, which is often referred to as neurotypical, is not an objective fact of neurological functioning but more so a standard established by **sociological processes and mechanisms**.⁷ Both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals can benefit from a high level of **understanding and empathy** towards their counterpart to foster a more inclusive society.



Neurodivergence can be acquired or congenital.

Congenital neurodivergence is a term used to describe conditions related to varied brain functions and behavioral traits that are **present from birth**. For example, autism or dyspraxia. **Acquired neurodivergence (or a neurodegenerative condition)** is a term used to describe conditions related to varied brain functions that **arise later in life**.⁸ This can be due to an injury, disease, or health condition. These conditions can improve or deteriorate with time. Examples of acquired neurodivergence is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Acquired Brain Injury (ABI).

Words & Phrases with Ableist Origins

Ableist language assumes that "disabled" people are less worthy as compared with "nondisabled" people through the use of terms such as "disease" or "disorder". This language has permeated societal views and treatment of neurodivergent people resulting in a negative impact on mental health through such dehumanizing terms.⁹ Even though there has been a positive change in how language regarding neurodivergence is approached, there still remains ableist societal terms in how neurodivergence is commonly described. Ableist language can support a long held system of discrimination and perpetuate ableist norms that negatively effect neurodivergent individuals through discrimination and dehumanization.¹⁰

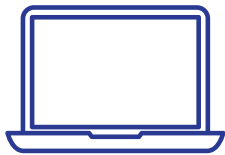
ABLEIST TERM	WHY IT'S PROBLEMATIC	ALTERNATIVE
Crazy/ Insane/ Mad	Used to stigmatize mental illness or cognitive function. This can be viewed as offensive and as a way to mock or dehumanize.	Alternatively, use "People with a mental illness" or "Person with an intellectual disability" ¹¹
Mute / Dumb	Implies an inability to do something and lack of intelligence with origins rooted in describing a lacking of ability to speak before being used as a perjorative term.	Use language that emphasizes what people can do instead of what they cannot. "Person who uses a communication device" or "uses an alternative method of communication" ¹²
Normal	Implies that people with disabilities are not normal or defective and that people without disabilities are the societal ideal. ¹³	Comparison between disabled and non-disabled individuals should be used carefully or avoided.
Special/ Gifted	Labeling someone as "gifted" negates their other identities, reducing them to a single trait. However, it is still used and recognized as a valid term for technical descriptions such as "special education".	To describe a skill or talent that someone has you can acknowledge this without reducing that person to one trait, such as being autistic. This highlights their aptitude rather than their disability.
Suffers from/	The use of neutral language is preferred rather than using terms that imply pity. Some individuals do suffer from their diagnosis, but it should not be assumed that this is the case for everyone.	"They are living with..." or "They have..." or "They are diagnosed with..." are more appropriate to use pending permission from the individual. ¹⁴

Dig Deeper...

Interested in understanding more about neurodiversity? Take a deep dive into the 8 Senses document and our Sensory Design Strategies document!



- [Words Matter](#) - Guidelines from the American Psychiatric Association on reporting on mental health conditions



- [Neurodiversity Hub](#) - A resource guide aimed at changing the narrative about neurodiversity through education and awareness.



- [Inclusive Language Guidelines](#) - The United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy aims at removing barriers to achieve inclusion.

How to cite: Marchand, K., McChurch, S., et al. (2025). *Language matters: Neuro inclusion*. Perkins&Will, PRECEDE: Neuro Inclusion Initiative. <https://www.precede.perkinswill.com>

Authors' Note

Much of early neurodiversity research was led by non-neurodivergent researchers who framed neurodivergent identities as disorders in need of correction. This noninclusive research has been focused on describing neurodivergence often through ableist language. This document was written from an identity-first voice in furtherance of community pride.

This document is primarily US centric. This is in part due to the authors' lived experience and knowledge base. We acknowledge that neuroinclusion is a global issue, and hope that this work can be expanded upon and applied from an international perspective.

We welcome feedback! If you have any questions or insights to add, or you are interested in learning more, please reach out to the primary authors:

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Special thanks to our Internal Contributors: Kate Dailey, Cristina Lozano, Jacob Williams, and Danielle Baez.

In addition, we want to honor the rooted and invaluable feedback from our community. We value these voices and are always looking for feedback. Please reach out with any comments or questions.

This document was made with text, formatting, color, and word choice that is best suited for reading accessibility.

Endnotes

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