



Intentional Language Use

Language is never neutral and, just like culture, has a fluid nature that is always shifting and evolving. The language that we use to talk about people matters; it plays a big role in shaping our perceptions of people and even their perceptions of themselves. Since one of our goals as educators is to uplift and empower young learners, we need to use our language with intentionality.

We aim to use language that aligns with an individual’s preference. This is not an easy task and it is not something that you are expected to inherently know. To understand the language a person prefers, we must first listen. This includes listening to individuals, as well as to communities. How do people refer to themselves and their community? When in doubt, it is more than appropriate to directly ask someone the language they prefer – much like asking your students if they go by a nickname on the first day of class.

Educators are often taught to use person-first language exclusively and that identity-first language should be avoided. This is generally a good choice if you don’t know how a person identifies or if you yourself are not a part of the community to which you are referring. It is important to know, however, that many people prefer identity-first language and, as we know, preference is key.

Person-First Language	Identity-First Language
“person with disability” “person with autism” “person who is deaf”	“disabled person” “autistic person” “Deaf person”
Language used to emphasize the person, not the impairment.	Language used to signal that the disability does not lie within the individual, but rather in the ways that the environment or social context can be disabling.
Preferred in the media, professional writing, and most schools.	Preferred by those who claim disability as a part of their identity that cannot and should not be separated.
Person-first language is a good place to start, unless you yourself are a part of the disability community and prefer otherwise or unless you are using language that people have asked you to use or that you know is preferred by a particular community or individual.	Some people feel that person-first language was not rooted in disabled persons’ desires or preferences. If someone prefers identity-first language, there is no need to shy away from it.

Critical Thinking

Our goal is to support your thinking about the ideologies behind the language we use. Think deeply about who made the terms we use and why, what assumptions are behind them, and how they position the people using the terms, as well as those being referred to.

One question to consider: Is the term we are choosing to use pointing to deficits within individuals or groups or do they highlight systems of oppression? (EX: "at risk" vs. "underserved")

Language to Avoid
Avoid euphemisms (EX: "special," "special needs," "differently abled", "normal," "challenged"). This language reinforces that disabilities are bad or should not be talked about. We can communicate that we all have human needs, as opposed to some people's needs being special or different.
Avoid referring to students as part of a statistic (EX: "the 3%").
Avoid referring to students as their special education placement or classification (EX: "inclusion kids," "self-contained kids," "resource room kids," "IEP kids", etc.).

The evolving and shifting nature of our work undoubtedly keeps us on our toes. Teachers are tasked with navigating a myriad of differing social relationships along with the growth and development of many different students. This is no easy task, yet it is one that educators have pursued with tenacity. We are consistently working towards learning and unlearning language that reinforces deficits in efforts to disrupt this chain. We are grateful for the opportunity to continue to learn and adapt alongside you.