Skinner House Author Guidelines for Avoiding Ableism

Skinner House Books is committed to inclusive publishing and affirming the worth and dignity of all our readers. Our editors understand that many authors share our commitment but are also unsure of how ableism shows up in writing or how to avoid it. With special thanks to contributors Rob Spirko, Gretchen Maune, and Brittany Wallace, we offer the following guidelines, which reflect current best practices as commonly accepted by the disability community, acknowledging that the disability community is not a monolith and there is no complete consensus. If you are working with a Skinner House editor, they will gladly discuss these guidelines with you and answer any questions, in continuing relationship with disabled consultants.

Resources

The following resources reflect broad consensus among the disabled community and we strongly recommend that you review them to stay up to date and practice intentionality in following them as much as possible.

- National Center for Disability in Journalism
- Lydia X.Z. Brown's Ableism/Language blog post
- Office of Language Access for New York State, Person-First and Identity-First Language Glossary

The advantage to many online guides is that they are living documents, updated with reasonable frequency. The challenge is always that preferred terminology can change. New terms come into wide use, often replacing older language associated with harm or outdated thinking about human experience.

Referring to Disabled People

When we ask how someone identifies or wants to be referred to, we honor their lived experience. Wherever possible, ask individuals about the terminology they use to describe themselves and use that language. No community is monolithic, and each person has needs and sensitivities around identity language that should be respected. When referring to a specific disability group and not individuals, you can minimize the potential for harm by using the terminology that is currently most widely accepted.

Don't be afraid to say "disabled"*:* "Person-first" language (e.g. "person with a disability") was long considered the polite norm. However, many disability advocates now encourage the use of "identity-first language." The experience of being disabled is often central to their identity, not something to be tacked on with a preposition. In disability justice circles, person-first language has come to connote a well-intentioned outsider. It's still often found in official and governmental communications, but Skinner House recommends using identity-first language unless deferring to someone's preference for describing themself.

Avoid the language of pity. Many disabled people feel that their disability is just another part of who they are or what they've always known. When discussing or writing about their experiences, center empathy and compassionate, inclusive language. Avoid terms that subjugate the disabled person or minimize their disability. For example, instead of describing someone as "wheelchair bound," one might say a person is a "wheelchair user." Another example is that someone with a schizophrenia diagnosis does not "suffer from" but instead "lives with" schizophrenia.

Avoid euphemisms and describing disability as inherently a challenge*:* Well-intentioned euphemisms, such as "differently abled," "handi-capable," and sight-challenged," are frequently used by non-disabled people but should be avoided. Similarly, avoid the narrative of a person "overcoming their disability" to achieve some goal. Individuals' disabilities are integral parts of themselves, not conditions to be overcome.

Key Concepts

Disability: A challenge or set of obstacles that arises from a physical or mental condition and/or from a community's or society's collective decisions that raise barriers to access for people with a physical or mental condition that requires them to function in a way that is different than the social "norm." In many cases, disability only exists in those moments when access is limited.

Bodymind: A term that addresses the interplay between the body and mind, and how the body helps to shape consciousness. Some disability circles have adopted it because of its inclusivity for people with mental and physical disabilities. For further context, explore the Cartesian theory of mind-body dualism.

Disability rights: A movement in the United States that focused on legislative reform and inclusion. It produced notable successes in these areas, the widest reaching of which was the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Disability justice: Developed in LGBTQ+ and BIPOC communities, a new wave of disability advocacy and activism that more directly emphasizes intersectionality than the disability rights movement. It is crucial to note that "disability rights" and "disability justice" are not interchangeable terms. Each represents a different historical period and focus.

Models of disability: Conceptual frameworks that describe how disability is perceived, which affects how disabled people are regarded and treated and how resources are allocated. The models are not mutually exclusive, and the model that any individual disabled person considers as the model that best describes their life experience is a highly personal decision. The disability models are sometimes misappropriated as guidelines for treatment, but they are really ways to describe the existing reality of how society thinks about disability. We encourage authors to be very mindful about which model they may be subscribing to in the way they write about disability and disabled people and the implications of that model.

Medical model: A model that positions disability as something that departs from recognized norms of human shape or function, necessitating "corrective" measures such as surgery, medication, prosthetics, and so on. The medical model is generally well intentioned and often helps people with conditions that inherently have a negative impact on quality of life, but it also generally puts the burden on disabled people to change themselves to accommodate society's standards rather than on society to change its standards to include them.

Charity model: A model that views disability as a tragedy that well-intentioned allies can alleviate through fundraising or providing services. Historically, disabled people have been sidelined in the planning and management of these charitable endeavors and thus regard the model with skepticism.

Social model: A model that positions disability in the context of our social world, finding that disability occurs when the bodymind must interact with a world that was not designed for it. The social model of disability is currently the most widely accepted and reflects how the disability community views societal power relations. It emphasizes a disabled person's agency and asserts their right to access the world as fully and easily as a non-disabled person does.

Cultural model*:* A model that calls on society, disability culture, and social movements to reframe their perspective on disability to perceive it as a valuable and vital part of human diversity.

Rehabilitation model of disability*:* A model that focuses on maximizing a person's functional capacity and independence by addressing both individual constraints and environmental barriers.

Inspiration Porn: This term refers to representations of disabled people used to inspire nondisabled people. This phenomenon is sometimes found in meme form, such as a disabled person performing some strenuous action with the motto "What's your excuse?" The clear implication is, "Look, this disabled person can do this, while you are presumably sitting lazily on your couch." The term "porn" is used because it represents the objectification and exploitation of one group of individuals for the benefit of another group. Often such representations are made by nondisabled people for nondisabled people. To be clear, not every inspiring story featuring a disabled person is inspiration porn, only such stories used in a way that objectifies the disabled person while seeking to motivate action in a nondisabled audience. It plays into a harmful logic of devaluing and pity. If your writing features a story or image of a disabled person, be very mindful of why you are using it and whether it is your story to tell.

Metaphors

Metaphors and figurative meanings have power to shape our understanding of what's "normal" and what's valued. It's common to dismiss the impact of metaphors by saying "It's just an expression" or "Everyone knows it's not literal," but that is exactly what gives them power to influence our thinking without our conscious awareness, and therefore without engaging our critical judgment.

Avoid pejorative metaphors that tie value to ability. Examples include "we are blind to the reality," "we are deaf to inspiration," "it's idiotic to think . . ." Skinner House recommends that authors review their drafts specifically looking for pejoratives used in these ways and revise to avoid causing harm.

Some metaphors can reinforce unconscious bias even if they are not pejorative. For example, the former name of "Side with Love," the UUA social justice campaign, was "Standing on the Side of Love.” At the 2017 UU General Assembly, Rev. Julián Jamaica Soto asked a critical question: “What happens if we can’t stand?” While no one intended to imply that only able-bodied people can protest, Rev. Soto’s question inspired the campaign committee to consider impact over intent. The initiative was renamed for a more thoughtful, inclusive approach to campaign language. Many disabled people say that they don’t mind embodied metaphors that don’t align with their lived experience but are not pejorative and even use such language themselves. Skinner House doesn’t take the position that embodied metaphors need to be eliminated entirely from writing, but we take particular care not to use them in titles, headings, and marketing copy, where they can have more impact on readers’ sense of inclusion than in basic text.

Be careful with metaphors of wholeness, brokenness, and healing. Under traditional ideas about disability, such as the medical model, disabled bodyminds were defined as inherently broken. It’s a good idea to be sensitive to this dynamic and to be mindful of how the concept of “wholeness” functions in your writing. How do you define “wholeness” and does this definition and any related content exclude disabled bodyminds? As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha asks in *Care Work*, “What do you think healing is? Do you think it means becoming as close to able-bodied as possible? Do you think it is always sad or terrible to be sick or disabled? Do you think everybody wants to be able-bodied and neurotypical and would choose it if they could?” Wholeness as a state of being should be available to everyone. For inclusivity, it can be helpful to keep some flexibility in your definition of what counts as wholeness; consider that it might lie in an acceptance of the state of one’s bodymind rather than its similarity to an external norm or an ideal.

Consider How Disabled Readers and Participants Use Your Content

For programs, rituals, curricula, or any resource used in a group, consider how disabled participants will be able to participate. Wherever possible, create accessible content that serves a broader audience with minimal adaptation and accommodation. Remember that disabilities are not always apparent and that disabled people deserve to be able to participate just as fully and as easily as anyone else. Consider the full range of physical and cognitive disabilities, not just what people can do physically but also what they can tolerate, how they can interact with others, how they can communicate, how much energy they can spare, and so on. It is Skinner House’s practice to hire accessibility reviewers to assess programming and worship resources for inclusiveness.

Representation matters. Be mindful of the life experience represented in your manuscript (such as in anecdotes, case studies, examples, or hypotheticals). When a resource uplifts a diversity of abilities and disabilities, it becomes more accessible and relatable to a wider audience.

Try to use plain language, especially for communicating information or procedures. Jargon and complex sentence structure can be challenging for any reader. Plain language is intentionally crafted to be straightforward and easy to understand. If you must include jargon, consider offering a simplified definition to provide clarity for readers unfamiliar with the terminology. Also break up large chunks of text into smaller paragraphs and sections with headings, which helps readers take in a concept fully before moving on to the next one.

Andrew Pulrang wrote a helpful article with an explanation and examples of what we mean by plain language in relation to disability justice and accessibility.