



Advocating for  
disability civil rights  
since 1979

April 21, 2009

Clark Hoyt  
Public Editor  
The New York Times  
620 Eighth Avenue  
New York, NY 10018

*Re: Disability Community Terminology*

Dear Mr. Hoyt,

On behalf of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF), a leading national civil rights law and policy center, I write to commend two recent New York Times articles discussing disability terminology, and to call for The Times's continued leadership on this front.

Founded in 1979, DREDF works to advance the civil and human rights of people with disabilities through legal advocacy, training, education, and public policy and legislative development. I draw on this expertise in offering the following remarks.

First, I would like to applaud The Times's recent style guide decision to prohibit the use of the offensive term "midget," as reported in your article "Consistent, Sensitive and Weird" (Apr. 18, 2009). Second, I am encouraged by some of the principles discussed in Philip B. Corbett's recent After Deadline blog entry, "Language and Disabilities" (Jan. 6, 2009). Mr. Corbett writes, "A person with a disability is a person, first of all, with many characteristics beyond the disability." Against the backdrop of the disability rights movement's struggle for inclusion and respect, these are both important steps in moving towards a journalism that is truly "people-first."

In light of The New York Times's role as a leading American publication, DREDF challenges the newspaper to live up to the full potential of these promising overtures. Disabilities can have a powerful, even defining, impact on an individual's life. Nonetheless, journalists who write about people with disabilities are writing about people, and not conditions or pejoratives. They are writing about people who are actively engaged in our communities as citizens, colleagues, family members, friends, and other loved ones.

On a basic level, the decision to call someone "disabled," or even a "disabled person," is not a decision about style, word count, or economy of phrase. This is not a decision that should be based on what seems "wordier" or "awkward," as Mr. Corbett seems to suggest in noting that people-first alternatives may not always be "feasible" (Jan. 6).

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**DISABILITY RIGHTS EDUCATION & DEFENSE FUND**

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Instead, this is really a decision about whether to foreground a condition over an individual, about whether to emphasize a characteristic over personhood. Phrases like “person with a disability,” a “child with autism,” and a “person of small stature” affirm the humanity of people with disabilities. Concerns about wordiness or awkward phrasing never excuse or justify the use of language that downplays humanity.

The attached “Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities” is a supplement to the thoughts in this letter. At present, these guidelines are the best general resource on the most acceptable terminology used to refer to people with disabilities. We urge The New York Times to continue to revise its style guide to reflect these guidelines. We further invite you to contact us at any time if we can be of assistance regarding disability rights issues as well as terminology about disability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Susan R. Henderson" followed by a horizontal line.

Susan Henderson  
Executive Director

Enclosure: *Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities*

cc: Bill Keller  
Executive Editor  
The New York Times

Jill Abramson  
Managing Editor  
The New York Times

John M. Geddes  
Managing Editor  
The New York Times