

Person-First Language and Thinking

(Working Draft)

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The Special Education Program faculty at USM is committed to using Person-First Language and Thinking in all course and program requirements, with the expectation that graduate students will also use Person-First Language and Thinking in all their course and program work.

Person-First Language and Thinking occurs when you put the emphasis on the person, instead of on the exceptionality of the person. This emphasis on the person is important to do, as it emphasizes that a person with an exceptionality has more in common with other people than differences because of their exceptionality. When you change the emphasis to the person, you start to see the person first, and it becomes clear that his/her exceptionality is only one piece of who he/she is, rather than of all of what defines him/her. It sounds simple, but this small change in language and in thinking does greatly affect how we view and interact with people with exceptionalities. Through using Person-First Language and Thinking, one is able to see that the needs and wants of people with exceptionalities are similar to their peers. This way of thinking is how people with exceptionalities want to be viewed. They want to be seen as equals to others, in that they want to be loved and accepted, to love, and to have opportunities to show their worth and value as a person, as do individuals without exceptionalities.

People with exceptionalities do not want their exceptionality to be the only defining aspect of who they are to others. This definition of self is similar to other people who do not want their weaknesses and/or challenges in life to be what defines them. For example, a child who has lost his mother does not want to be defined only as someone who has lost a parent, but by what he does in the world and how well he loves and cares for others. Many would say that living with the loss of a parent is equal to living with an exceptionality. Yet, an exceptionality is viewed very differently, as it is always seen as a negative trait that is always part of oneself and is consistently deprecating. However, many individuals do not view their exceptionality as only negative or a weakness. They see how they can do almost anything that others can do, even if it is in a different way. They see that they have gained from their exceptionality; for example,

many people state that they have learned determination and understanding for others through having an exceptionality.

Of course, it is important to state that not all people with exceptionalities feel this way. For example, there are individuals who have not learned to accept their difference from others through their exceptionalities, perhaps because they have been so mistreated, underestimated, told they can do nothing at all, or expected to do everything correctly, simply because of their exceptionality. People in society only see exceptionalities as a difference, which is a negative. Hence, when individuals are defined only by their exceptionality and not based on their many strengths, they learn to look down upon their own exceptionality. If society has repeatedly reinforced that their exceptionality is all they are, then their exceptionality will be a difference they will have to overcome their whole life.

When writing or speaking, to use Person-First Language you first state the person and then their exceptionality. This way of presenting a person also applies when you discuss people without disabilities. Again, you state the person first and then the fact that they do not have a disability. For example, instead of stating “the gifted child,” you state the child with gifted abilities. Through this example, when using language which is not Person-First, one might think “a gifted child” does not make mistakes and “gets everything correct” the first time he/she does it. However, by the small shift in stating a child with gifted abilities, the emphasis is on the child and that she has some, and not all gifted abilities, because no one is gifted in everything. Hence, the child is then always expected to be perfect, which is an expectation put on many children who have gifted abilities. Instead it is seen as normal for her to make mistakes and not to understand everything right away. This normalization can result in a huge weight being lifted off of the shoulders of students with gifted abilities.

In Person-First Thinking, when introducing a person or discussing them in writing or in person, you introduce or talk about the person first, and then the exceptionality. In addition, you think about the needs or wants of the person first, before what needs and wants come as a result of an exceptionality. For example, when conducting a case study, introduce the student you are writing about as a person, similar to how you would like to be introduced, before the exceptionality. Hence, introduce the person’s interests, describe who they are in general, and add their exceptionality as you would any other aspects of the person. No matter the exceptionality, all people want to be seen as equal to their peers, with similar wants and needs. By introducing

someone merely by their exceptionality, you are not only denying them of their whole selves, but you are also not allowing the person to whom you are introducing him/her the ability to get to know him/her at all.

Another aspect of Person-First Language and Thinking is avoiding the use of judgmental language when referring to someone with an exceptionality. For example, saying that a person is “confined to a wheelchair” is judgmental. Many people who use a wheelchair see it as creating independence and freedom for them to do what they enjoy doing. Therefore, when we state instead that someone uses a wheelchair, we take away the negative connotation that is implied when you describe someone as “confined” to a wheelchair.

In addition, to be in line with the trends of current political correctness, two words need to be defined when talking about the use of Person-First Language and Thinking. First of all, many people with disabilities do not like to be called “handicapped”. One reason for this noun is the origin of the word, which is from cap in hand, a beggar, which was how many people with disabilities have been viewed in the world. The word “handicap” is defined in the world of Disabilities Studies as something that society puts on a person, not something that originates from within the person. For example, many assume that a person who is blind needs doors opened for him/her, or assistance crossing a street. Hence, people may limit what they expect a person who is blind to do, or come to what they perceive to be the aid of someone who is blind when, in fact, help is not required, and instead they hamper the person’s independence. The limitation here is not because individuals are blind, but the result of a handicap that someone else put on them. Most people with disabilities prefer the word disability, rather than handicap, when they are referred to as having a disability. In Disability Studies, the word disability is defined as a limit of ability, inability, or completing a task in a nontraditional way, either physically or mentally.

The note should also be made that when referring to a particular person, it best to respect the individual and ask him/her how he/she would like to be referred. Sometimes a person’s preference does not follow Person-First language, and sometimes their preference is to use a different word than is generally used to describe the exceptionality. This preference is particularly important when talking about certain disabilities such as mental retardation, as currently there are many different ways to say mental retardation, e.g., cognitively delayed, and intellectually disabled, to name two. By following the desire of the person with the

exceptionality on how you are referring to their exceptionality, you empower the person and give him/her ownership over how he/she views him/herself.

The other aspect of Person-First Language and Thinking is to realize that one group of people considered by society to have a disability do not consider themselves to have a disability. The Deaf Community sees Deafness as a characteristic of their culture, not as a disability. Hence, when referring to people who are Deaf, the preferred way is to use Deaf, beginning with a capital, in front of the person, as you would when referring to someone who is Latino or Irish.

More examples taken from students' papers.

<u>Not</u> Person-First Language and Thinking	Person-First Language and Thinking
The CP girl	The girl with CP
Non disabled people	People without disabilities
Which can be used by most disabled and nondisabled people	Which can be used by most people with and without disabilities
The mentally ill guy	The man with a mental illness
Granted, I am a hearing white person, so my knowledge on the subcultures is limited. They felt like it was insulting the rest of the disabled community.	Granted, I am a White person who is hearing , so my knowledge on the subcultures is limited. They felt like it was insulting the rest of the community of people who are disabled .
While self- advocates rebel against professionals and the non-retarded world.	While self- advocates rebel against professionals and the world of people who are not mentally retarded .
Through funding and changes in thinking, they are enabled to live as their nondisabled counterparts.	Through funding and changes in thinking, they are enabled to live as their counterparts without disabilities .
People with handicaps	People with disabilities
Who was confined to a wheel chair	Who was in a wheelchair