



# Delta Gamma

1873

## Disability Etiquette Guide

and other helpful information on addressing, interacting and using appropriate language with individuals who are blind or visually impaired.





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## Introduction

This guide was compiled by caring Delta Gamma staff, volunteers and community partners and is meant as a resource of best practices for interacting with individuals with disabilities. It is important to note that the world, communication and people are ever changing. Our hope is that you always serve others with your heart and best judgment, and that this guide will help you in your service and interactions with individuals who are blind or visually impaired. If you ever have questions about how to interact with an individual with a disability, it is always best to ask the individual with whom you are interacting directly.

When interacting with someone who is blind or visually impaired, be yourself, relax and speak with the person in a normal tone of voice. Do not feel afraid to approach someone who is blind or visually impaired, and if you have trouble determining if they need assistance, simply ask — it is the kind thing to do. People who are blind or visually impaired are people, and they will let you know their needs, just like anyone else would. If you remember that most people who are blind are different only regarding their vision, you will be off to a great start!

Blindness does not affect a person's hearing or intelligence. Blindness does not change character or personality, and it does not bestow special qualities or powers. It affects vision in people we know as friends, neighbors, family and sisters. Hopefully after reviewing this guide, you will feel more confident in your knowledge about the blind and visually impaired community and in your interactions with them.

**“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.”**

**- Mark Twain**

## General Guidelines for Talking About Different Disabilities

There are many words to use and ways to refer to individuals with a disability. The following information is meant to answer some questions about what language to use and not to use.

The chart below features some ways that people with disabilities are described. This list includes “outdated language” which are terms and phrases that should not be used. This list also includes respectful language, which should be used to describe different disabilities and individuals. People have individual preferences for how you refer to them. What is “okay” for some people may not be “okay” for others. If you don’t know what to say, just ask how a person likes to be described.

| Disability                       | Outdated Language   | Respectful Language  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| General Disability               | Handicapped or the disabled   | Person with a disability   |
| No Disability                    | Normal, healthy   | Person without a disability, typical   |
| Blind or Visual Impairment       | Dumb, Invalid   | Blind or visually impaired, person who is blind/visually impaired  |
| Deaf or Hearing Impairment       | Invalid, deaf-and-dumb, deaf-mute   | Deaf or hard-of-hearing, person who is deaf or hard-of-hearing   |
| Speech/ Communication Disability | Dumb, “one who talks bad,” mute   | Person with a speech/ communication disability, person who communicates with alternative devices or eyes             |
| Learning Disability              | Retarded, slow, brain-damaged, “special ed,” learning disabled  | Person with a learning or cognitive disability   |
| Mental Health Disability         | Hyper-sensitive, psycho, crazy, insane, wacko, nuts   | Person with a psychiatric disability, person with a mental health disability   |
| Mobility/Physical Disability     | Handicapped, physically challenged, “special,” deformed, cripple, gimp, spastic, spaz, wheelchair-bound, lame | Person with a mobile or physical disability, person who uses a wheelchair or mobility chair, or is a wheelchair user |
| Emotional Disability             | Emotionally disturbed, crazy  | Emotionally disabled, person with an emotional disability  |
| Cognitive Disability             | Retard, mentally retarded, “special ed,” autistic child   | Cognitively/developmentally disabled, person with a developmental disability   |
| Short Stature, Little Person     | Dwarf, midget   | Someone of short stature, little person  |
| Health Conditions                | Victim, someone “stricken with” a disability (i.e. “someone stricken with cancer” or “an AIDS victim”)        | Survivor, someone “living with” a specific disability (i.e. “someone living with cancer or AIDS”)                    |

## HELPFUL HINTS

When talking about places with accommodations for people with disabilities, use the term “accessible” rather than “disabled” or “handicapped.” For example, refer to an “accessible” parking space rather than a “disabled” or “handicapped” parking space or an “accessible” bathroom stall rather than a “handicapped” bathroom stall.

Refer to a person’s disability only when it is related to what you are talking about. For example, don’t refer to people in general or generic terms such as “the girl in the wheelchair” since the wheelchair has nothing to do with the conversation you are having.

## PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

A common trend and courtesy when talking about individuals with a disability is to use people-first language. The purpose of people-first language is to promote the idea that someone’s disability is secondary. It is not the defining characteristic of the entire individual. To use people-first language, one would refer to the individual first, then to their disability when it is relevant and appropriate. For example, say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.”

When in doubt, use the formula below as a way to speak about the individual and their disability:

| Name or Title of a Person  | + | Verb                      | + | Assistive Device or Disability                |
|--|---|---------------------------|---|---|
| Customer, individual, professor, student, child, applicant, etc. |   | Has, uses, utilizes, etc. |   | Wheelchair, autism, developmental delay, etc. |

Many guides on disability language and etiquette may likely emphasize using person-first language, except perhaps, when discussing certain disability cultural groups that explicitly describe themselves with disability-first language. While it is generally safe to use people-first language, there are members of certain disability groups in the United States who prefer not to use it, such as the American Deaf community and a number of Autistic people/Autistics. The basic reason behind members of these groups’ dislike for the application of people-first language to themselves is that they consider their disabilities to be inseparable parts of who they are. Using people-first language, some also argue, makes the disability into something negative, which can and should be separated from the person. As mentioned throughout this resource, if you are in doubt, please feel free to ask the person about whom you are speaking.

# Working with the Blind and Visually Impaired Community

## WHEN GUIDING SOMEONE WHO IS BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED:

- Offer the use of your arm (at or around the elbow), walking normally. Don't take their arm as this can be invasive. Most often an individual who is blind would rather take your arm.
- Consider the accessibility of a building when walking or navigating a space. Be mindful of the route you are guiding them through or directions you might give them when walking on their own.
- Give specific, non-visual directions. The words "here" and "there" are too general for descriptive use. Be specific and label objects that give direction and location.
- Orient an individual with visual impairments by using numbers on the face of the clock. Straight ahead would be 12, directly to the right would be 3, directly to the left would be 9, etc.
- Describe the layout of large rooms. A brief description of how the furniture is arranged can make it easier for that person to navigate their surroundings. Generally, an in-depth description is not needed. A description such as, "the room is set up in a classroom style" or "there is a low coffee table in front of the couch" will work.
- If you come to a door, mention how it opens (in or out, left or right).
- Indicate the direction of stairs (up or down) and if they are wide or narrow. If there is a handrail, it is often useful for individuals who are blind or visually impaired to access the rail for additional guidance. Additionally, you don't need to tell the person how many stairs there are, as this can be confusing. Simply when to step up or down and use of the handrail is enough.
- When showing a person who is blind to a chair, place their hands on the back of the chair. They will be able to navigate the rest.
- When dining out, offer to read the menu, including prices. Describe the location of the food by using clock numbers as reference points as mentioned above. You may always ask if the person needs additional assistance with their food.

## SERVICE ANIMALS:

Some people who are blind or visually impaired may use a service animal to assist them with daily living. Here are some tips on interacting with an individual and their service animals:

- Don't distract, feed or pet the animal. These animals are working, and by distracting them you could be putting them in a situation that is detrimental to their owner.
- Even if the animal is at rest, be sure to ask the owner's permission to interact with the animal.
- Respect the handler's wishes. If they tell you something you should or should not do when interacting with their service animals, comply with their requests.

- Do not speak to the service animal when they are on duty. This can be distracting to the service animal, and they need to be alert to take commands from their handler. Instead, speak to the handler about any instructions or information.
- If you are guiding or walking with someone who has a service animal, walk on the opposite side of the service animal.
- Don't say the animals name or feel like you have to introduce it. Saying its name can be distracting.

### **WHEN SPEAKING WITH AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED:**

- Identify yourself by name when initiating a conversation. You should not assume the person will recognize your voice. Just as you would identify yourself when you make a phone call, it is helpful to identify yourself when speaking to someone who is visually impaired. Similarly, when with a group, it's often helpful to go around the room and have everyone state their names so the individual who is visually impaired knows who is in the room.
- Don't use hand signals. People with severe visual impairments can't see hand motions, descriptions using your hands, waving or pointing.
- Speak directly to a person who is blind. Do not speak to a family member or friend instead and ignore the person who is blind. Remember they are humans, and they can speak for themselves.
- Do not censor your language when speaking to individuals with disabilities. It's perfectly okay to use words like watch, look and see when talking to someone who is blind. People with visual impairments are not offended by these words and understand that these words are part of normal conversations.
- Feel free to talk about visual entertainment, such as sports, television and movies. People who are blind or visually impaired have the same interests as sighted people.
- Give verbal indication when you walk away from a conversation or leave the room. If the individual to whom you are speaking can't see you, they may not know you walked away. A quick word that you need to leave will eliminate any awkward moments.

### **WHEN CREATING AN EVENT OR WORKING WITH AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED:**

- Do not be afraid to ask questions. If you're curious about the technology a person is using or if you would want to know what they can or can't see, don't be afraid to ask. Most people with a disability would rather have you ask questions than make assumptions.
- Provide electronic copies of material you'll be handing out in hard-copy form or presenting via PowerPoint prior to a meeting. This gives staff with disabilities the opportunity to load the documents onto their computer or other device and print them in an accessible format or listen to them in auditory format. Providing copies ahead of time is a simple courtesy. Just as you would never give a handout to all the tall people in the audience and tell anybody below 5'10" you'll send them a copy later, don't



make people who are visually impaired be the last in line to receive essential information.

- Try to avoid highly stylized typefaces. When preparing documents, avoid using stylized or graphical fonts, as these can be difficult for individuals with low vision to read. Instead, use easy-to-read, sans-serif fonts with clearly defined letters and clear spacing between the letters, such as Helvetica, Verdana or Arial.
- Add alternative text tags to graphics. If you insert a graphic or photograph into your PowerPoint presentation, Word document or web page, add alternative text tags which briefly describe the image. Depending on the software you're using, this can usually be done by right-clicking on the graphic and choosing "properties."
- Not all people with visual disabilities use braille. Consider presenting information in alternative formats.

### **REMEMBER:**

**DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS** - People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Don't make decisions for them. Depending on the situation, it could be a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to exclude people because of a presumption about their limitations. For example, if you offer assistance and the individual declines, then it is important to respect their decision as they know what is best for themselves.

**RESPOND GRACIOUSLY TO REQUESTS** - When people who have disabilities ask for an accommodation, it is not a complaint. It shows they feel comfortable enough to ask for what they need.

**DO GOOD** - When you meet someone who is blind or visually impaired, be yourself, use common sense and do good.



## References

“Disability Etiquette Guide”

<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/Disability%20Etiquette%20Guide.pdf>

United Spinal Association, Tips on Interacting with People With Disabilities

<http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf>

Syracuse University Language Guide

<http://sudcc.syr.edu/resources/language-guide.html>

“Nine essential tips for working with people who are blind”

<http://www.perkins.org/stories/nine-essential-tips-for-working-with-people-who-are-blind>

“Teaching Students with Visual Impairments”

<http://www.teachingvisuallyimpaired.com/social-etiquette.html>