What is Neurodiversity?

There are a lot of different terms related to neurodiversity. This resource guide defines some key terms and provides some useful tips and resources about autistic culture.

Key Terms to Know

Neurodiversity refers to natural differences in the brain that can lead people to experience and interact with the world in a variety of ways. These differences are not considered "right" or "wrong."

Example use: "Our workplace values neurodiversity and works to accommodate and support all employees."

Neurotypical people generally behave and process information in ways that are considered standard or typical.

Example use: "John's communication skills and social interactions are typical for his age; these qualities are often associated with neurotypical people."

Neurodivergent people see and understand the world around them differently than neurotypical people. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are two examples of diagnoses that are considered to be nuerodivergent.

Example use: " Neurodivergent students often have unique views and strengths that can help create classrooms that are diverse and open to everyone."

Self-identification may occur when people identify themselves as being neurodivergent without having a formal diagnosis. This may occur when a person has difficulty getting an appropriate assessment, or if a person does not want a formal assessment.

Example use: "Molly, who self-identifies as having autism, joined an online group for people who identify as neurodivergent."

Language Preferences

For a long time, people were encouraged to use **person first** language when discussing people with disabilities. This movement focused on person's disability being just one part of their identity.

Person with autism

Autistic person

Many people with disabilities prefer **identity-first** language because they feel their disability is an important part of their identity.

Each person and family may have a different preference about the language they use to describe their disability. Identity-first and person first language are often both used in order to respect both preferences. The best way to determine a person's language preference is to ask them! It is also acceptable to ask a caregiver if a person is unable to communicate their preference due to complex communication needs.
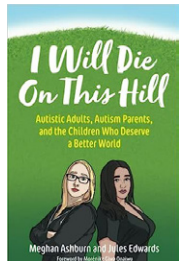
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What is Neurodiversity?

Resources

Books

I Will Die on This Hill by Meghan Ashburn and Jules Edwards

Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking by Julia Bascom

Sincerely, Your Autistic Child: What People on the Autism Spectrum Wish Their Parents Knew About Growing Up, Acceptance, and Identity by Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network

Uniquely Human: Updated and Expanded: A Different Way of Seeing Autism by Barry Prizant

We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation by Eric Garcia

What I Mean When I Say I'm Autistic: Unpuzzling a Life on the Autism Spectrum by Annie Kotowicz

Online

Autistic Self Advocacy Network at autisticadvocacy.org

Autism Intervention Research Network on Physical Health (AIR-P) at airpnetwork.ucla.edu/

Autism Intervention Research Network on Behavioral Health (AIR-B) at www.airbnetwork.org

Research

den Houting, J. (2019). Neurodiversity: An insider's perspective. _Autism_, _23_(2), 271–273. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318820762

Leadbitter, K., Buckle, K. L., Ellis, C., & Dekker, M. (2021). Autistic self-advocacy and the neurodiversity movement: Implications for autism early intervention research and practice. _Frontiers in Psychology_, _12_, 1-7. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.635690

Stenning, A., & Rosqvist, H. B. (2021). Neurodiversity studies: Mapping out possibilities of a new critical paradigm. _Disability & Society_, _36_(9), 1532–1537. 10.1080/09687599.2021.1919503

Tips

- **Partner with autistic people!**
  When working on a project that involves autism, get input from autistic people – ask them what they think about your ideas.

- **Respect language differences!**
  Ask someone if they prefer person or identity-first language and do your best and use their preference of _a person with autism_ and/or _an autistic person_.

- **Learn more about autistic culture!**
  Read articles, books, or personal stories written by autistic people. Engage with autistic communities through online forums and social media. Attend workshops and training that feature autistic speakers.

- **Use a person-centered approach!**
  Focus on improving quality of life rather than trying to make a person look "less autistic" or forcing them to behave in a standard or typical way.

Additional resource guides and a full list of references at https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/.

Vertucci, K., Slavin, L., Mallory, S., Fletcher, A., & DNEA CDS Team. (2023). _DNEA resource guide: What is neurodiversity?_ Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism.

Research Recap: Avoiding Ableist Language

Ableism is discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities and people perceived as disabled. Ableism characterizes people as defined by their disabilities as inferior to people without an identified disability. It's important that professionals understand what ableism is, reflect on the language they use in their communication, and use non-ableist language alternatives to describe autism and autistic people.

Language and meanings are constantly evolving, what appears in the table below as recommendations may be inappropriate in some current or future contexts. Ableist discourses are not always reducible to terminology, so it would be possible to avoid using any of the terms in the table that are recommended against and still be perpetuating ableism through language choices.

> " I am proud of my identity and of my community. I don't "have" something that makes me who I am. I simply am.
>
> *- Amy Sequenzia**

* https://awnnetwork.org/from-ableist-to-self-advocate/

Potentially Ableist Terms/ Discourses and Suggested Alternatives	
Current Ableist Terms	**Suggested Alternatives**
Special interests	Focused or passionate interest, areas of interest or expertise
Special needs	Describe the specific needs of the individual
Challenging behavior, disruptive behavior, problem behavior, abnormal behavior	Specific description of their behavior (flapping, bumping, stimming, meltdowns, self-injurious)
High/Low functioning	Describe the individual's strengths and needs, acknowledge the level of support needed
At risk for autism	Increase likelihood, chance of autism
Suffers from autism	Has autism, is autistic
Comorbid (unless used in a medical or diagnostic setting)	Co-occurring
Autism symptoms	Describe their characteristics, features, traits
Treatment	Support, services, educational strategies
Normal, typical kids, healthy	Neurotypical, nonautistic, individuals without disabilities
Cure, recovery, optimal outcome	Describe goals of the individual

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What is Plain Language?

Information is all around us. Using accessible forms of communication helps all people to better understand the information around them. **Plain language** and **easy read** are two ways to make communication accessible.

What is plain language?

Plain language is a style of communication that people can understand the first time they read or hear it (PLAIN, 2011). There is not one correct way to write in plain language.

What is written in plain language for one person, might not be plain language for another person. Big ideas are broken into short sentences and commonly used words when writing in plain language.

Why is plain language important?

Access to information is a civil right (Public Law 111-274). Being able to find and understand information is an important part of participating in the community.

Sharing plain language information and resources helps to meet the needs of all audiences.

What is easy read?

Easy read is another accessible way to write.

Writing in easy read looks different from writing in plain language.

Easy read uses short sentences with a picture that goes with the meaning of each sentence.

Easy read also uses spaces in between sentences to break up main ideas.

There is *only one idea per line* when writing in easy read (ASAN, 2021).

It is important to keep in mind who will be reading your writing when deciding whether to use plain lanaguage or easy read. Choose the writing style that works best for your audience.

Easy Read Resource

Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). (2021). *One idea per line: A guide to making easy read resources*. https://autisticadvocacy.org/resources/accessibility/easyread/

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What is Plain Language?

Not Plain Language

The local artisan exhibit provides vendors with the opportunity to sell their artwork with community members and will be taking place next Friday at the park.

This is a long sentence with many uncommon words.

This sentence is written above a high school reading level.

The most important information (event date and location) is listed last.

Plain Language

The community art fair is next Friday at the park. Local artists will be selling their artwork at this fair.

Information is broken up into two sentences.

These sentences use common words and the writing is at a 5th grade reading level.

Important information is listed first.

Easy Read

The local art fair is next Friday.

This fair will be at the park.

Artists will sell their art at the fair.

There is only one idea shared in each sentence.

There are pictures to go with the meaning of each sentence.

The sentences have plenty of space between them.

References

Plain Writing Act of 2010, Public Law 111-274. (2010). https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-111publ274

Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). (2011). *Federal plain language guidelines.*

Additional resource guides and a full list of references at https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/.
Steinbrecher, A., Fletcher, A., Cowin, A., Mallory, S., & DNEA CDS Teams. (2024). *DNEA resource guide: What is plain langage.* Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism.

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How Do I Write in Plain Language?

Follow the tips below when writing information in plain language. Check your writing at each step by answering the "ask yourself" questions below.

1. Use short sentences

Ask yourself

Are my sentences at 10-15 words or less?

Writing tip

Break-up long sentences by looking for "connectors" (such as "and/but" or dashes/commas). Many times, these "connectors" can be turned into separate sentences.

Hint

Writing tools like Microsoft Word™ and Google Docs™ include a word count. Highlight the sentence or section you are working on to check if your writing is less than 10-15 words.

2. Use common words

Ask yourself

Is my writing at a 6-8th grade level?

Writing tip

Sometimes you will need to use large or uncommon words in a sentence. These words can increase the reading level of your writing. When using an uncommon word, **bold** the word the first time it is used and give a plain language definition.

Hint

Check the reading level of your writing by using Microsoft Word's Editor tool. You can also check reading levels by visiting websites like _Hemingway_.

3. Put the most important information first

Ask yourself

What information do I want people to know?

Why do I want them to know it?

Writing tip

Putting the most important information first helps readers to quickly understand what they need to know. If your writing is long, repeat the main idea multiple times.

Hint

People remember the information they read at the beginning of a list or document better than information that is in the middle of a document (Cheung, 2017).

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How Do I Write in Plain Language?

Follow the tips below when writing information in plain language. Check your writing at each step by answering the "ask yourself" questions below.

4. Use examples in your writing

Ask yourself

Did I give an example the first time I defined a new word or idea?

Writing tip

Examples are a great way to make your writing easy to understand. Writing out examples is especially helpful to use when introducing new words or big ideas.

Hint

Good examples can replace long explanations in your writing (PLAIN, 2011). Think about how you would explain something during a conversation to help you write out your examples.

5. Ask for feedback

Ask yourself

Who is my audience?

Who could give me feedback on what I wrote?

Writing tip

If possible, ask multiple people to review your writing to make sure it is accessible.

Hint

Writing in plain language can be a back-and-forth process. Give yourself enough time to review and edit your work.

References

Cheung, I. W. (2017). Plain language to minimize cognitive load: A social justice perspective. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, 60*(4), 448-457.

Hemingway Editor. (2024, September 11). *Hemingway app makes your writing concise and correct.* https://hemingwayapp.com

Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). (2011). *Federal plain language guidelines.*

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