Table 1 Guidelines for Writing about Animals with Disabilities

Step	Application to Humans	Application to Nonhuman Animals
1. Disclosure and mentioning a disability	**Don't:** assume a person wants to disclose their disability **Don't:** describe overcoming their disability as inspiration	Consider and make clear the purpose of disclosing an animal's disability in all communication. **Don't:** disclose to garner pity, promote a narrative of overcoming a disability to inspire or use to fundraise beyond treatment needs **Do:** disclose to raise awareness and promote inclusion
2. Emphasize abilities	**Don't Use:** wheelchair-bound; non-verbal, mute or can't talk; can't see **Use:** person who uses a wheelchair; communication device; or is blind, low vision or navigates without sight	**Don't Use:** mobility-challenged or can't see **Use:** animal who uses a ramp or other mobility device; is blind, low vision, or navigates her environment without sight
3. Person first (though some people prefer identity/ disability first language)	**Don't Use:** disabled person; the disabled; dwarf*, midget **Use:** person with a disability; a person of short stature or little person	**Don't Use:** disabled animal **Use:** animal with a disability For both humans and non-humans, dwarfism is used as a term to describe those with reduced body sizes due to evolution and environment. It is not offensive when scientifically accurate and used with respect.
4. Ask people about preferred language	**Don't:** assume people's preferences **Use:** the language people prefer Some people see their disability as an essential part of who they are and may prefer identity-first language like autistic person, or (D) deaf person.	**Use:** animal-first language as this is the current standard when discussing people with disabilities It could help people practice appropriate language when talking about people with disabilities.

For the full article, click [Guidance for Depicting Animals With Disabilities – Whitley – Curator: The Museum Journal](#)

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5. Neutral language	**Don't:** portray the person as passive, victim or defective or use terms like "afflicted," "damaged," "defect," or "suffer"; stroke victim; person suffered a spinal cord injury; birth defect; brain damaged; or afflicted with epilepsy **Use:** person who: had a stroke; acquired a spinal cord injury; has a congenital disability, brain injury or with epilepsy	**Don't:** portray the animal as passive, victim or defective or use terms like "afflicted," "damaged," "defect," or "suffer"; stroke victim; birth defect; or suffering from dermatitis **Use:** animal who had a stroke; has a Congenital disability or dermatitis
6. Emphasize accessibility language	**Don't Use:** handicapped parking or disabled restroom **Use:** accessible or ADA parking or restroom	**Don't Use:** a disabled/handicapped accessible habitat or disabled entrance **Use:** a habitat that has been altered to meet their needs or accessible entrance
7. No condescending euphemisms	**Don't Use:** terms like challenged, handi-cable, special and even differently-abled as they are considered condescending euphemisms While animals are unlikely to be impacted by these terms, their use impacts people with disabilities.	
8. No offensive language	**Don't Use:** freak, retard, lame, crippled or crazy	
9. Describing people without disabilities	In discussions that include people or animals with and without disabilities, do not use words that imply negative stereotypes of those with disabilities. **Don't Use:** normal, healthy, able-bodied, whole with people or animals **Use:** people or animals without disabilities when contextually relevant	
10. Disability is not an illness or tragic	People and animals with disabilities can be healthy, although they may have a chronic condition. This is not tragic. **Don't:** refer to people or animals with disabilities as patients, ill, sick or unhealthy simply because they have a disability **Don't:** use stories that are intended to perpetuate negative stereotypes or elicit pity, which often focus on incurable diseases, congenital issues or severe injuries **Do:** create stories that highlight ability and accessibility	

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11. Don't perpetuate negative stereotypes about psychiatric and cognitive disabilities	There is much stigma around psychiatric disabilities. Only use "disorder" when referring to a medical diagnosis. **Don't Use:** is bipolar, unsuccessful suicide, committed suicide, schizophrenic, is mentally ill, stressed, depressed or anxious **Use:** has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, attempted suicide, died by suicide, person with schizophrenia, has a mental health condition, is neurodivergent or is/has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), is exhibiting a stress (anxiety, depression) response Broadly referencing someone as neurodivergent is preferred over referencing neurodivergence as a disorder.	Research suggests that animals can have some psychiatric and cognitive disabilities such as anxiety, depression and Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). No current studies suggest that animals are autistic or have ADHD. **Don't Use:** the lion is stressed (in reference to the lion experiencing stress/a disability) **Use:** the lion is exhibiting a stress response after being transferred here yesterday
12. No inspiration or charity heroics	Simply living with a disability does not make a person or animal exceptional, heroic or inspirational. **Don't:** discuss a person or animal with a disability as being heroic or an inspiration simply for living their lives	
Additional Suggestions beyond the ADA Guidelines		
13. Avoid categorizing the condition's "severity"	The addition of some adjectives before discussing a disability can create a hierarchy or imply judgement. **Don't Use:** terms like high functioning, low functioning, severe and significant; person is high functioning autistic; the lion has severe anxiety **Use:** person is autistic; the lion has an anxiety condition	

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14. Speciesism and ablism are linked	The reality is that animal support organizations may have to make decisions about euthanizing animals with disabilities. Framing these decisions about the disability is problematic and sends a message that animals with disabilities are unimportant and that death is better than providing care that may be burdensome. When organizations cannot manage the care of an animal with a disability this should be stated for transparency. **Don't:** use an animal's disability or age as the reason an animal had to be euthanized, such as the turtle was euthanized after struggling to walk or due to his advanced age **Use:** James the turtle was humanely euthanized when it was determined that his pain and discomfort could not be adequately managed and he was no longer able to eat and drink	
15. Anthropomorph-izing disability for animals with disabilities	Disability is a human concept. **Don't:** project assumptions about an animal's abilities or how their community will or will not accept them based on analogous human disabilities or assume the animal will have a poor quality of life based on disabilities that humans experience **Do:** discuss disabilities that animals have relative to human disabilities without focusing on positive or negative outcomes. For instance, use phrases like "Stubby has a skin condition, which would be similar to eczema in people." When and how to anthropomorphize disability for animals with disabilities should be carefully considered. First apply the recommendations under "Disclosure and Mentioning a Disability." Then consider whether anthropomorphizing an animal with a disability is useful in broadening discussions, enhancing understanding and providing support. Specifically, does it create an avenue for people to consider, practice and advance understanding?	
16. Promote accessibility over accommodation	Accessibility is a proactive approach aimed at identifying and removing barriers so that all can participate without extra work. Accommodations are reactive approaches when recognizing that the environment is not accessible. Accommodations are adjustments to environments on an as–needed basis. Focus on accessibility as a primary response.	