

Ableist Language – texts and questions

Name _____ Date _____

TEXT A

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jun/14/lizzo-removes-harmful-ableist-slur-from-new-song-grrrls-after-criticism>
(Jun 14 2022, Sian Cain)

Lizzo removes ‘harmful’ ableist slur from new song GRRRLS after criticism

Pop star says she ‘never want[ed] to promote derogatory language’ and re-releases song, removing offensive term for spastic diplegia



Lizzo has apologised for using an ableist slur in her new song GRRRLS, saying, ‘as a fat black woman in America, I have had many hurtful words used against me’.

Photograph: Noam Galai/Getty Images for Youtube

Lizzo has removed an offensive term for disabled people from her latest song after days of public criticism, saying she “never want[ed] to promote derogatory language”.

GRRRLS, the latest track from the musician’s upcoming album Special, was released on Friday. In the opening verse, the pop star – who has become well-known for her lyrics championing acceptance and self-love – used a derogatory term for spastic diplegia, a form of cerebral palsy.

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The song was almost immediately criticised by fans and disability advocates, with tweets and TikToks explaining the history and offensive nature of the term being shared and liked hundreds of thousands of times.

Lizzo released a written public apology on Monday.

“It has been brought to my attention that there is a harmful word in my new song GRRRLS. Let me make one thing clear: I never want to promote derogatory language,” she wrote. “As a fat black woman in America, I have had many hurtful words used against me so I understand the power words can have (whether intentionally, or in my case, unintentionally.)”

She said she was proud to release a new version of the song with a changed lyric.

“This is the result of me listening and taking action,” she wrote. “As an influential artist I’m dedicated to being part of the change I’ve been waiting to see in the world.”

As the song had yet to be released as a physical purchase, the previous version of GRRRLS has been replaced on streaming services and digital stores with the new lyric “hold me back”.

Special (album) is set to be released in July.

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Text A - questions

1. Highlight two different language features in the text and complete the table below.

Language feature	
Example (quote from text)	
Language feature	
Example (quote from text)	

2. Highlight two organisational features in the text. What are they?

1	
2	

3. How is punctuation used in the text? Find three different punctuation marks and explain why they are used. **Do not include capital letters or full stops.**

Punctuation mark	Why is it used?

4. Define the following words. You can use a dictionary.

Ableist	
Offensive	
Criticism	
Influential	
Streaming	
Slur	
Derogatory	
Promote	

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5. Replace the **highlighted** word. Keep the meaning of the sentence the same.

*saying she “never want[ed] to **promote** derogatory language”*

6. Find a fact and an opinion in the text.

Fact	
Opinion	

7. Is the text positive, or negative? How do you know?

Points for further discussion

Which are the most powerful words used in the text?

Why are we looking at this particular text? What is it about? Who does it impact?

Why is it important to keep an open mind?

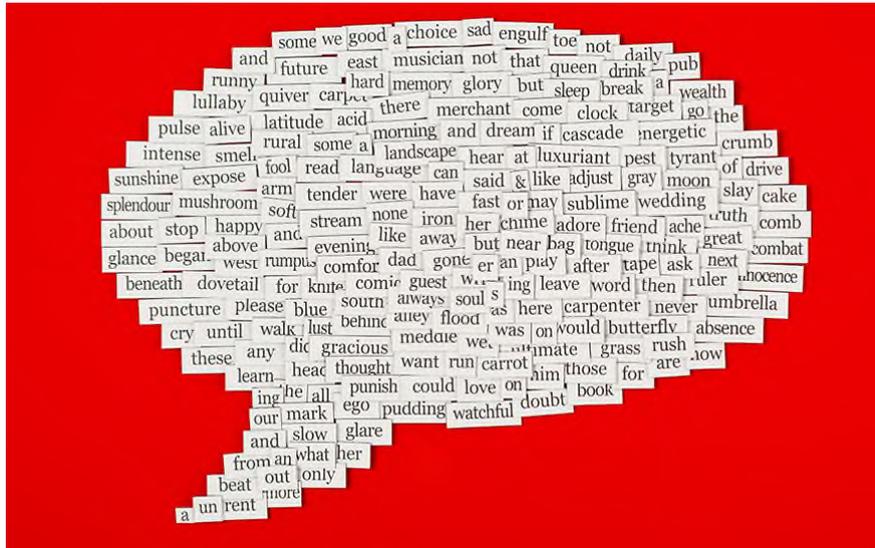
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TEXT B

Source: <https://hbr.org/2020/12/why-you-need-to-stop-using-these-words-and-phrases>
(Dec 15, 2020, by Rakshitha Arni Ravishankar)

Why You Need to Stop Using These Words and Phrases



mrPliskin/ Getty Images

Try this experiment: You're sitting at your desk, when your friend texts you an article about a topic you're passionate about. You read it and ask her what she thinks. To your surprise, her opinion is the complete opposite of your own. This obviously upsets you. Later that evening, as you explain what happened to your partner, how do you describe your friend's point of view?

If you said it was "stupid," "insane," "crazy," "lame," or "dumb," you have (unknowingly or not) participated in spreading ableist language.

You may be surprised to learn that your response was a form of discrimination. People use ableist words and phrases everyday without realizing the harm they do.

Ableism is defined as discrimination or social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. It can manifest as an attitude, stereotype, or an outright offensive comment or behaviour. When it comes to language, ableism often shows up as metaphors ("My boyfriend is *emotionally crippled*."), jokes ("That comedian was *hysterical!*"), and euphemisms ("He is *differently abled*.") in conversation.

As a journalist with a background in media studies, I spend a lot of time thinking about language and the words we choose to express ourselves. Our words, and the reasons why we choose them, reflect the times we live in. Just like some historically racist, sexist, and derogatory terms have been retired, so have a handful of ableist slurs that were used to dehumanise, stigmatise, and institutionalise people in the past. At the same time, too many people continue to casually spew ableist language to ridicule, criticise, or dismiss others.

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My intent is not to shame anyone, it is to help more people understand how to identify and stop using words and phrases that reinforce ableism. I reached out to several disability rights advocates for their insights. Here's what I learned.

Ableism is bigger than language.

Language is a tool we use to make sense of our feelings and environment. When we verbally describe the things, experiences, and people around us we are also assigning value to them and that value impacts how we interact with each other.

Ableist language largely influences us in three ways:

1) It reveals our unconscious biases.

Lydia X.Z. Brown, a disability justice advocate, told me that our attitudes towards disability show up in the language we use.

“If we believe people with mental illness should not be in our workplace, life, family, or neighbourhood, then, it’s easier to rationalize using ableist words,” Brown said. “You might think: ‘Only crazy people do that. I don’t do that, so it’s okay for me to say.’ But when people say these things, they send a signal to people with psychosocial disabilities that we are not welcome.”

Of course, Brown noted, that language is just one-way ableism shows up. “By removing ableism from your vocabulary, you don’t remove ableism from your surroundings.”

Ableism can be blatant, especially in work or school environments. It could be the lack of accessible infrastructures, or something more insidious, like performance evaluations based on what are traditionally considered “productive” or “appropriate” behaviours.

Shain Neumeier, a lawyer and activist, added, “Unfortunately, people may not realize that doodling during a meeting [or class] may be your way of paying attention, especially if you’re someone with an invisible disability. They might just think it’s an abnormal behaviour for that space.”

2) It makes us internalize harmful biases about disability.

When you treat a disability as a joke, metaphor, or euphemism, you are causing harm in a couple of ways. First, you are spreading the idea that it’s acceptable to dehumanise and stigmatise someone with a disability. Depending on your circle or friend group, you could even be encouraging others to do the same.

Second, a disabled person may end up internalizing those ideas themselves.

“The first time someone makes fun of you or people like you (even if it’s not directed at you), it’s a little drop in the bucket. It’s like a poke,” Neumeier said. “But, when you are put down 100 times, over and over again, you start feeling disrespected, and it becomes hard to be around the perpetrators. Specifically in the work environment, if there is an imbalanced power dynamic, and the perpetrator is your boss, it can be very difficult.”

Neumeier also pointed out that writing off a slur or universally unacceptable expression — like the r-word— may be easier for a disabled person than constantly confronting **microaggressions**. If the person facing discrimination doesn’t have a support system, they may start to believe something is wrong with them, and that’s dangerous.

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3) It stigmatizes already marginalized people.

Allilsa Fernandez, a mental health and disability activist, told me that using words that are ableist can distract attention from the point you're trying to make and normalize the idea that disabilities equate to insults.

Fernandez explained, "When you say Trump is such a 'psycho' or 'weirdo' for his stance on immigration, you end up focusing on those specific words, without addressing the real issue: what it is that you don't like about the immigration policy."

If you do want to critique the administration's policy or anything for that matter, Fernandez advises that you talk about the reasons you agree or disagree with it. "When you attack a person's physical and mental abilities in place of actually expressing an opinion or idea, you further stigmatize people with disabilities," said Fernandez.

Make a conscious effort to improve your vocabulary.

Using ableist language doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you a person. But, if you have the privilege to change your vocabulary for the better, then why not try?

I asked my interviewees for a few beginner tips. This was their advice.

1) Acknowledge the disability around you.

More than one billion people worldwide, around 15% of the population, have some type of disability. People with disabilities make up a quarter of the US population.

Professor Beth Haller teaches disability and media studies at Towson University. She told me the more conscious we become of the disability around us, the less we are likely to stigmatize it *as something to be fixed* and look at it as *something that is*.

"Usually, people exist on two ends: People either feel bad for you if you are disabled or state that they feel 'lucky' for the life they live (without the disability)," she explained. "Both of those things are unhelpful."

Haller said that, as a world, we need to get out of the mindset that a disabled person has "less than the rest of us." That's where the discrimination begins.

Pro-tip: Don't try to fix disability; instead fix the oppression.

2) Learn, learn, learn.

"Education, that's where you start," Fernandez says. "It's not that people don't stop and think about the impact their words have on others, it's just that language is very deeply ingrained. It reflects our families, friends, cultures, and identity." According to Fernandez, becoming aware of our own biases — many of which we've picked up from the people we've met, the experiences we've had, and the media we've consumed throughout our lives — is the first step to educating ourselves.

Another way to become more aware of our own biases is to listen more than we talk. Neumeier told me to think of listening as a means of building stronger relationships — at work or beyond. "Look at every interaction you have as a way to bond with others, rather than just a clash of ideas. Otherwise, we are all going to feel isolated."

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Finally, Brown added that it's important for everyone to use the resources put out by disabled people. "Look for articles, books, videos, podcasts, and other work by disabled writers and activists. Use these tools to learn about the way discrimination or ableism works." Doing so will help you recognise when it's happening in real life — whether it's coming from you, or someone else.

Pro-tip: Educate yourself, and don't rely on others to teach you.

3) Don't make assumptions about someone's identity.

Linguistic rules are evolving. In the late 1980s and early '90, during the AIDS epidemic, organizations began to move away from words like "handicapped" and embrace what is referred to as people-first language, according to Haller. Instead of defining people by their disability, the movement sought to focus on the fact that people with disabilities are first and foremost, just people. An example of this would be saying "a person with a disability" instead of "a disabled person."

This was the linguistic rule for some time. Then, in the early '90s, other disability communities, like the National Federation of the Blind and the d/Deaf community, mobilized for an identity-first rule so disability could be recognised as an identity and not just a medical category. For instance, some individuals may prefer 'Deaf' (capitalised) instead of "people who are deaf" or "people with loss of hearing."

The history behind our identities and how we name them is complex. "Today, the best strategy is just to ask people how they want to be addressed," Haller said.

Everyone I interviewed echoed this sentiment: clarifying questions about identity show respect.

Pro-tip: Golden rule is: When you're unsure of someone's identity, just ask.

4) When you make a mistake, genuinely apologize.

"When someone tells you that something is disrespectful, you don't have to understand why they are hurt. Just that they are," said Brown. "I love cooking for my friends. But, if someone says they didn't like a dish I made for them, then I'm not going to force them to eat it. I don't have to understand or argue or even agree with them. But if I have a choice, why would I make my friend a dish they don't like?"

Brown cautions to be aware of your reaction if someone calls you out. Getting defensive may be a natural response, but the last thing you want to do is make someone else's pain about you, even if you had good intentions. Instead, genuinely check yourself, say you're sorry and do better in the future.

Pro tip: This isn't about your opinions; it's about how the other person feels.

My big takeaway from these conversations is that the pain and isolation that accompany discrimination and prejudice run much deeper than the ableist words many of us were taught as kids. Those words hurt people and that hurt is valid.

The upside is that history shows us that language and communications evolve. This means we have a lot of room to create vocabularies that are more empowering and inclusive — ones that make everybody feel welcome.

Language isn't meant to alienate us; it's meant to help us understand one another.

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Text B - questions

1. Highlight two different language features in the text and complete the table below.

Language feature	
Example (quote from text)	
Language feature	
Example (quote from text)	

2. Highlight two organisational features in the text. What are they?

1	
2	

3. Define the following words. You can use a dictionary.

Prejudice	
Discrimination	
Isolation	
Stigma	
Marginalised	
Assumptions	
Advocate	
Identity	
Bias	
Alienate	

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Questions 4-6

Replace the **highlighted** words. Keep the meaning of each sentence the same.

4. *The upside is that history shows us that language and communications **evolve**.*

5. *'The history behind our identities and how we name them is **complex**'*

6. *'too many people continue to casually **spew** ableist language to ridicule, criticise, or dismiss others.'*

7. Which **two** of the following statements are examples of informal language?

create vocabularies that are more empowering and inclusive	
if someone calls you out.	
This was the linguistic rule for some time.	
casually spew ableist language	

8. Tick all the examples of opinion.

"Today, the best strategy is just to ask people how they want to be addressed," Haller said.	
Allilsa Fernandez, a mental health and disability activist,	
The upside is that history shows us that language and communications evolve.	
Depending on your circle or friend group, you could even be encouraging others to do the same.	

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9. This question is based on text A and text B.

Compare similar ideas from both texts about the impact that words can have on a person.

In your answer you should:

- Give one similarity from these texts about the impact of words on a person.
- Give one quotation from text A and one quotation from text B to support the similarity.

For further discussion

According to Fernandez, becoming aware of our own biases — many of which we've picked up from the people we've met, the experiences we've had, and the media we've consumed throughout our lives — is the first step to educating ourselves.

How might the media we consume shape how we view others? Is the media biased? Toward who? How do we know?
