



Photo by Pavan Trikutun

# COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

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Dr. TC Waisman  
Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman  
Edited by: Patrick Dwyer  
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PREPARED FOR



**Sinneave**  
FAMILY FOUNDATION

# Communications Guide Introduction

## How to use this guide

In this increasingly connected world, we are utilizing more methods of communicating with individuals near and far. As a society are becoming more attuned to various considerations we should have of individuals, disabled or not, based on their communication strengths, needs, and preferences.

The purpose of this guide is to offer a clear, succinct, and actionable set of ideas and recommendations for you to employ in your work with Autistic and neurodivergent individuals. In this guide we choose to capitalize the word Autistic in accordance with recent changes in my (TC Waisman) Black community that capitalizes the word Black to acknowledge our culture, ethnicity, and community. Capitalizing the word Autistic acknowledges the unique culture and community surrounding Autistic folks. The main sections entail written and verbal communication, and our tips are organized depending on the specific type of platform or context. At the end of each section we offer some knowledge checks that allow you to engage with the material and determine the applicability of the ideas into practice. We conclude with a series of actionable steps, as well as a list of resources, to take these insights with you and explore other useful tools.



Tip: You will find tips in this area in each section.

# Communications Guide Introduction

## Terminology

### Accessibility

Accessibility in this guide refers to ensuring that the materials discussed in this guide are accessible to as many people as possible. For example, when designing visual material, we ask you to consider accessibility for those who may have sensitivity to bright colours, those who learn through graphic representations, etc.

### Identity-first language

Within the disability world, you may come across many variations in how individuals describe themselves. The person-first language movement (e.g., “people with disabilities,” “person on the spectrum,” “individual with hearing loss,” “individual has physical mobility differences”) has been used widespread and is especially prevalent in use among people who are not members of the disability community themselves. This approach puts less of an emphasis on the disability and instead centers on the person holistically. However, not everyone adopts this terminology. In fact, many people in the disability community are more saliently recognizing their disabilities as core identities. Hence, the identity-first language movement (e.g., “Autistic,” “deaf,” “blind”) emphasizes the disability as a core attribute in how an individual perceives themselves. This language choice is now very common, though sometimes produces confusion and even disdain among both people within and outside of the disability community. As Autistic people, we authors tend to use identity-first language, as we embrace these core identities in our personal and professional lives. We also recognize that this sentiment is not always widespread. Consequently, we contend that whenever in doubt about what’s most appropriate, clearly explain your rationale for what terms you use. Perhaps use both identity-first and person-first language concurrently. Most importantly, ask someone in the disability community what terms they most prefer, so as to honour their perspectives.



Tip: You will find tips in this area in each section.

# About Universal Design

## History

Universal Design (UD) began in architecture as a result of laws that were informed by the disability movement in the late 60s. Architects began designing buildings and surrounding landscapes with accessibility in mind rather than renovating buildings to suit peoples needs as needed.

Ramps, automatic doors, braille signs, auditory instructions etc. became the norm in UD architecture. We learned that accessible designs such as ramps were not only used by those in wheelchairs or crutches, they were mainly used by able-bodied individuals who had strollers, dolley's, rolling luggage, etc. Universal design in architecture was not only a functional part of our city environment, UD in architecture became an aesthetically pleasing part of our city. We learned from accessible design in architecture that designing for accessibility from the beginning of a project benefits the whole of society.

## Using UD

- **Designing with UD in mind.** Utilizing UD in communication means making your verbal, written, or visual material easy-to-read, clear, concise, and functional. Throughout this communication guide, we utilize UD informed practices in the layout, design, and tools presented. More information about UD can be found in the resources section at the end of guide.



Tip: Use muted colours for those with light sensitivities

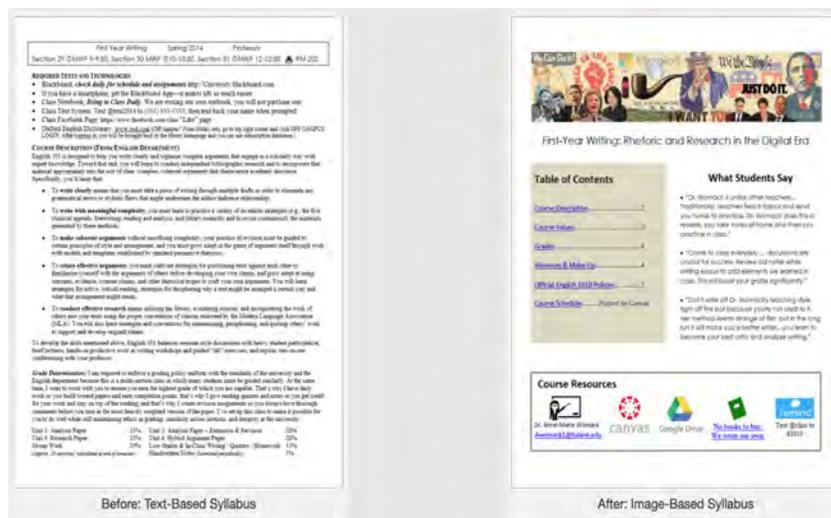
# Universal Design

## Accessible Communication

**Do This**

**Don't Do This**

- **Be clear.** Speak clearly using accessible language that reaches the largest audience.
- **Be concise.** Say what you mean and give an example.
- **Use visuals.** Sometimes a picture is worth 1000 words and many in your audience may be visual learners.
- **Leave white space.** A good guide is to leave 40% white space in your documents.
- **Consider your audience.** Address your whole audience when you communicate so consider their various needs and how you can address them in your communication.
- **Fill the space with words.** Having too many words on a document or recording can be daunting to some and make your communication inaccessible and overwhelming.
- **Use jargon.** Exclusionary language such as industry jargon and acronyms will make your communication inaccessible to some.
- **Use difficult to read font.** 12 point font from the sans serif family makes your written communication more accessible to those with dyslexia.
- **Speak on only one level.** Addressing only academics or industry professionals in a communication that reaches many people will create barriers to access for some.
- **Cover too much information.** If you need to give a lot of information, break it up into themes and consider breaking each theme out into its own publication.



A before-and-after example of UD in syllabus communication.

# Verbal Communication

## Any context

- **Speak at a measured tone.** Talking quickly may be especially hard for individuals who need more time to process information, or are not as accustomed to comprehending the language you speak.
- **Use familiar words and terminology.** Acronyms, abbreviations, jargon, shorthand, and niche references are bound to be confusing for some people in any context, especially if they cannot see it presented in written form.
- **Communicate concisely.** The rule of parsimony echoes the notion of being straightforward and simple. Share ideas succinctly and clearly.
- **Convey authenticity.** People can often detect disingenuousness. Instead, coming off in a relatable and true manner helps build connection.
- **Recognize the “space” you take when speaking.** In order to build a more equitable environment, individuals should be attuned to how much they are talking, even more so if it reduces opportunities for other colleagues to speak. This principle is especially applicable when individuals hold more powerful social roles (e.g., white, male, more senior/advanced in an organization, etc.).
- **Listen more.** Actively listening to colleagues when they are speaking can enable you to be a more thoughtful communicator in the process. This tactic may include not immediately preparing what to say next, but rather paying attention to the content and meaning of their message.
- **Watch your language.** Cursing should be avoided in most professional contexts, even in a playful manner, as you may not know how others will respond to such verbiage. Derogatory language should never be used.

### *Do This...*

- BE AWARE OF CADENCE
- USE ACCESSIBLE WORDING
- SPEAK SUCCINCTLY
- SPEAK HONESTLY
- RECOGNIZE PRIVILEGE
- LISTEN ATTENTIVELY
- AVOID DISRESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

### *Don't Do This...*

- SPEAK IN A RUSHED MANNER
- USE JARGON
- MAKE LONG SPEECHES
- BE DISINGENUOUS
- TAKE ALL THE SPACE
- TALK MORE THAN YOU LISTEN
- USE DISRESPECTFUL LANGUAGE



Tip: Recognize that some individuals may prefer not to communicate verbally; instead, ensure that there are useful alternative platforms for people to express themselves.

# Verbal Communication

## Delivering Presentations

### ***Do This***

- **Use a microphone** to ensure that individuals can clearly hear you, particularly when in a larger room.
- **Determine if colleagues require interpreters and/or captioning.** Sending out a survey prior to an event ensures proper measures can be taken.
- **Share a schedule or outline.** Read this aloud and present this in a complementary visual format (if possible) to provide individuals with expectations of what is ahead.
- **Invite feedback.** Let everyone know that they are welcome to share their input or questions at a particular time. Perhaps offer individuals the space to write ideas and queries on notecards, should they feel uncomfortable sharing aloud.

### ***Don't Do This***

- **Directly call on a colleague/attendee to participate.** This may produce discomfort or lack of preparation, particularly for individuals not as adept in thinking of answers quickly.
- **Fail to introduce yourself.** Everyone should be aware of who you are and what your role is.
- **Dismiss time limits.** People have places to be, and not following the allotted time may have implications on how other individuals can accomplish their work.
- **Use gendered language.** “Howdy, fellas,” “what’s up, ladies?,” and “hope you guys are having an awesome day” are just a few examples that may not cover individuals in the room. Instead, employ terms like “everyone” and “all.”
- **Share a ton of information** without enabling time to process. All the more reason to speak slowly and deliberately, as well as provide space for individuals to reflect on what you said.



Tip: Describe any imagery that you feature within a visual presentation; that way, other individuals can better understand the meaning and significance of its incorporation.

# Verbal Communication

## Engaging in conversations

### ***Do This***

- **Recognize boundaries and physical spacing when communicating with others.** While the Coronavirus pandemic has encouraged individuals to engage in more distancing from other individuals, it also serves as a reminder that people across different cultures speak from varying distances. This same principle may apply for individuals based on their hearing differences and additional identities that may prompt a desire to speak closer (or farther apart) to one another. When in doubt, just ask what is a comfortable distance.
- **Demonstrate friendliness with the words you select.** Just as words like “open,” “welcome,” and “attentive” convey the idea of warmth and understanding, words like “dismiss,” “segregate,” and “interfere” suggest coldness and hostility. Do interrogate power structures and inequities.
- **Pay attention to your tone of voice.** Realize that individuals may sense you are impatient, exhausted or aggravated, for instance, through how you present yourself.
- **Use people’s names** (and find out their pronunciation). You can have the greatest impact on someone when you learn their names and know how to properly say them. Ask if you are unsure.

### ***Don't Do This***

- **Act pushy** by encouraging other people to speed up what they are saying. Not everyone may be able to relay information as fast as you.
- **Interrupt other people** when they are speaking. Cutting people off is not only rude, but also may inhibit them from fully processing their thoughts.
- **Talk to just some, not all.** Maintaining eye contact and the dialogue with just a few of the people in your vicinity, and not everyone in the space, may both reinforce negative power structures and also prompt disdain.



Tip: When possible, ensure that you are engaging in a conversation in a space free of distractions (visual, auditory, etc.).

# Knowledge Check

## Verbal Communication

1. *Which of these approaches may ease an individual's comfort in verbally communicating with you? (select all that apply)?*

- a. Asking them about an appropriate distance to talk
- b. Avoiding jargon and acronyms
- c. Talking at a measured pace (not too slow, not too fast)
- d. Jumping in with your thoughts as they are speaking



Answer below.

2. *You are provided the opportunity to give a big presentation to your team. What steps can you take to ensure your audience's needs are accounted for?*

Answers:

1. A, B and C are correct. For A, you want to ensure that individuals can express what they view as a comfortable distance (based on culture, distractions, COVID protocols, etc.). For B, using familiar language is a good bet, especially since individuals have different levels of knowledge with niche terms and acronyms. For C, talking at a measured tone enables processing. For D, it is rude to interrupt someone, and it may also inhibit processing thoughts.
2. You can apply a number of tools, from asking about attendees' visual and auditory needs to ensuring that attendees have the space to process and ask questions.

# Written Communication

## Emails

- **State your email subject clearly and concisely** in the subject heading. Clear subject headings give the reader an idea of what the email is about and allows the reader to formulate a quick priority check regarding their time.
- **Clarify when an action is needed** at the beginning. Stating the action needed in bold at the beginning of the email allows the reader to understand what you are requesting from them.
- **State the due date.** Stating the due date in bold next to the action allows the reader to gauge when they will need to schedule time to complete this action.
- **If you do not require a response, state it at the beginning.** Alerting the reader to the fact that you do not require a response allows the reader to read without feeling compelled to respond. It also makes for a relaxed read.
- **Keep content concise.** Whenever possible, limit your email to key points only. Readers may get overwhelmed when they see more than a few paragraphs. Three paragraphs with 2-3 sentences each keeps the email readable.
- **Keep language unambiguous.** Write your emails in clear, non-flowery language that states exactly what you mean. Don't leave anything up to interpretation.
- **Use point form.** If you have several points that you can list, put them in bullet-form rather than writing them out in full paragraphs. This allows the reader to quickly pick up the important points and respond to you in a timely manner.

### *Do This...*

- TRY TO BE CLEAR & CONCISE
- CLARIFY ACTIONS NEEDED
- ADD DUE DATE
- STATE NO RESPONSE NEEDED
- WRITE SHORT EMAILS
- USE CLEAR LANGUAGE
- USE POINT FORM

### *Don't Do This...*

- MAKE SUBJECT AMBIGUOUS
- BURY ACTION REQUEST
- HIDE DUE DATES
- MAKE READER WORK
- WRITE VERBOSE EMAILS
- CONFUSE READERS
- WRITE LONG PARAGRAPHS



Tip: Using font from sans serif family makes it more accessible for those who are dyslexic.

# Written Communication

## Emails

### Do This

Clear call to action



**Call to Action:**

Please respond by Monday February 15th with your preference for an area that you'd like to focus on in a small group discussions.

Concise points



Hi James,

As per our leadership team meeting on Friday February 5th, here are the 6 areas we agreed to look at to truly become a more inclusive organization:

1. Ensure our decision-making leaders reflect the diversity in our stakeholders (top down)
2. Use inclusive language
3. Train our team about equality, diversity, and inclusivity and what it actually means in our particular environment
4. Make it safe for all employees to teach and update us on respectful practices
5. Model inclusive language, actions, and practices throughout the organization
6. Facilitate collaboration across stakeholder groups to support inclusivity in their environments

Reference to attachment



Please choose one point you're most interested in and we will gather all leaders interested in the same area to discuss next steps and form a sub-committee. For more detailed information about the discussion on February 5th, please click on the pdf attached. If you have any questions, please email or phone me directly.

Sans serif family of font

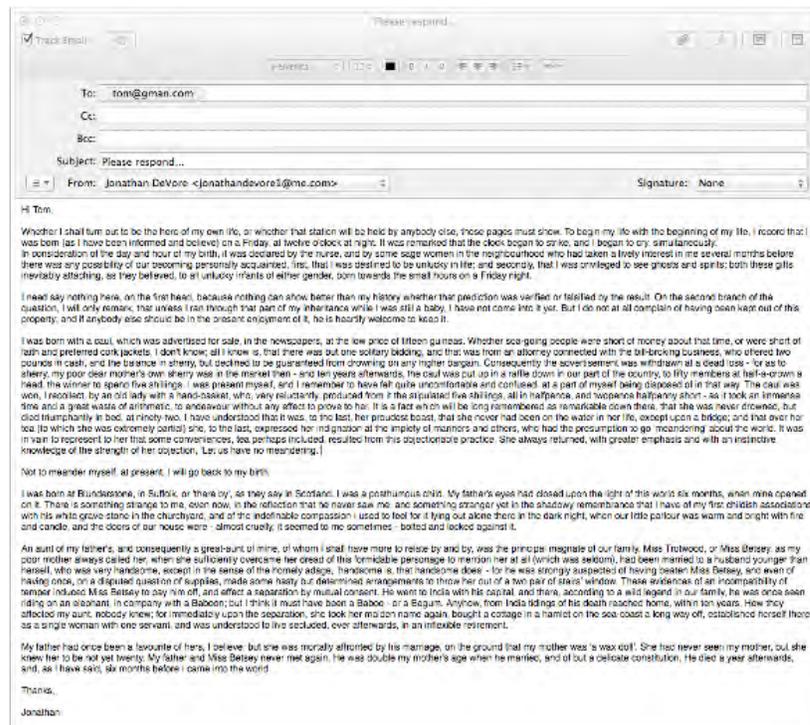


Thanks again for your time and for adding to the rich discussion about becoming a more inclusive organization.

Sincerely,

Tom.]

### Don't Do This



# Written Communication

## Newsletters & Handouts

### ***Do This***

- **Consider your readers' differences.** Think about the variation in your readers' abilities, age, learning needs, level of education, culture, etc. in your writing
- **Keep language simple and respectful.** Use language that respects everyone.
- **Use visuals where you can.** Visuals can sometimes convey more than words and appeals to visual learners.
- **Give examples if applicable.** Examples give the reader a deeper understanding of your concept.
- **Consider the impact of your words on different people.** A written opinion can be provocative and also respectful.
- **Vary the length of different pieces.** Some readers may only have time for short pieces while others may want an in-depth read so offer a variety.
- **Include a terminology section.** If you use lesser known terminology, write a section explaining the words that might not be familiar to everyone in your audience.

### ***Don't Do This***

- **Write for one audience.** Make sure your articles are accessible to different people.
- **Use font that is too close together.** Font should be from the sans serif family for ease of reading.
- **Fill the pages with written words only.** Written words without visuals or whitespace make it very difficult to read.
- **Use jargon or words that exclude some readers.** Clarify terminology and use simple words to make your newsletter more accessible



Tip: Realize that information you include may be quickly outdated. When appropriate, add dates and time-based context to indicate when the content was created.

# Written Communication

## Papers & Reports

### ***Do This***

- **Feature a table of contents or outline** for individuals to follow.
- **Understand from the beginning what you want your audience to takeaway.**
- **Mark each section clearly**, perhaps through section headings, borders, and other tools that indicate separate.
- **Leave plenty of white space** in the document.
- **Present information visually** via graphs, tables, and other straightforward ways of showing data.
- **Summarize sections** clearly and concisely so readers understand the main points.
- **Present a list of resources** for readers to consult.

### ***Don't Do This***

- **Provide an overwhelming amount of information.**
- **Compose long paragraphs.**
- **Omit sections.**
- **Use small font** that is not from the sans serif family.
- **Incorporate outdated information** such as non-respectful terminology or old research.



Tip: Realize that information you include may be quickly outdated. When appropriate, add dates and time-based context to indicate when the content was created.

# Written Communication

## Instructions & Procedures

- Start with the outcome in mind.
- Consider the variety of people who are in your audience and consider their needs.
- Ensure you understand thoroughly how to utilize the tools or procedures you're presenting so you can create instructions with clarity.
- Consider what questions might come for those who are using your tools or procedures for the first time.
- Give your instructions in different formats, such as written, video, or recorded sound.
- Use simple and easy to understand accessible language.
- Add only the information that is most necessary.
- Break instructions up into tasks and procedures into actions.
- Include a 'frequently asked questions' (FAQ) section to answer the questions that might come up.
- Consider how successful a typical IKEA instruction document is that utilizes only visual graphics to convey instructions.



### *Do This...*

- UNDERSTAND THE TOOLS
- KEEP LANGUAGE ACCESSIBLE
- BE CLEAR & CONCISE
- BE TASK ORIENTED
- ADD CLEAR VISUALS
- BE SPECIFIC
- GET FEEDBACK & EDIT

### *Don't Do This...*

- USE SLANG OR JARGON
- WRITE LONG DESCRIPTIONS
- BE GENERAL
- MAKE READER WORK TO UNDERSTAND
- WRITE INACCURATE INFO
- SKIP IMPORTANT STEPS
- COMPLETE WITHOUT TESTING

# Knowledge Check

## Written Communication

1. *Which of these statements would be the most reader friendly?*

- a. Hey ladies, what's up?
- b. Cellular phones and laptops are used in communication everyday because everyone needs it in order to get their work done, communicate with their friends and family, and explore the vast world of the internet which is an extraordinary place to learn, do business, challenge assumptions, learn new information, and meet new people in a way that cannot be done simply by moving about the neighbourhood and city you live in.
- c. In this article, we focus on the challenges that Autistic individuals might experience in higher education.
- d. Thank you for your contribution to our foundation. We appreciate your support.



**Answer below.**

2. *You are tasked with creating a handout. What are some things you can do in your written communication to ensure you are meeting the needs of your varied audience?*

**Answer:**

1: 'c' is the correct answer. 'a' is informal, gendered, and disrespectful, 'b' is a run on sentence with too much information, and answer 'd' utilizes font that is too small.

2: Consider the following: using visuals where you can, consider the impact of your words on different people and give examples when you can.

# Actionable Steps

## Short-term

1. Ask attendees - prior to an event - how you can best support their learning via adopting various communication approaches.
2. Incorporate backward design into presentations you give; think about what your intentions are and review how you can meet your objectives. Being mindful of individuals' distinct ways of processing and communicating information should always factor into your choices.
3. Reach out to your disabled colleagues - in a non-tokenist manner - and ask about their ideas in making verbal or written content more inclusive in nature. Importantly, express your appreciation for the time and labor they may expend in supporting your efforts.
4. Reflect on the most rewarding conversations you have shared with colleagues and identify how communication style and approaches may have influenced the dialogue.



## Long-term

1. Invest time and money in consistent and sustained professional development (including guest presenters and consultants) on enhancing communication practices in the workplace.
2. Revisit job posting verbiage (to ensure content is clear, succinct, and inclusive) and reimagine job hiring processes that honor potential employees' various communication styles and preferences (e.g., sending interview questions in advance).
3. Institute "communication reviews" across the workplace that enable employees to share their joys and frustrations with how colleagues express their opinions and insights across various contexts (e.g., emails, meetings).
4. When posting job opportunities, consider hiring employees that are representative of your community of stakeholders including those with disabilities. Having representatives of the community you serve in the organization and at the decision-making table can ensure accurate representation of the community in all aspects of the organization.

# Resources

## About Universal Design

**Use UD in communication-training from our research:**

<https://enact.sonoma.edu/c.php?g=789377&p=5650618>

**7 Principles of Universal Design:** <http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/The-7-Principles/>

**Avoiding Ableist Language:** <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0014>

**Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2:** <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

Rose, D. (2000). Universal design for learning. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 15(3), 45-49.

Black, R. D., Weinberg, L. A., & Brodwin, M. G. (2015). Universal design for learning and instruction: Perspectives of students with disabilities in higher education. *Exceptionality Education International*, 25(2).

## Workplace

**Accessible emails:** <https://www.litmus.com/blog/ultimate-guide-accessible-emails/>

**Accessible Emails & newsletters:** <http://universaldesign.ie/Products-Services/Customer-Communications-Toolkit-for-the-Public-Service-A-Universal-Design-Approach/Digital-and-Web-Based-Communication-Guidance/Email-and-Newsletter-Guidance/>

**Inclusive Meetings:** [https://issuu.com/autselfadvocacy/docs/pl\\_inclusive\\_meetings](https://issuu.com/autselfadvocacy/docs/pl_inclusive_meetings)

**Inclusive fonts:** <https://www.fifteendesign.co.uk/blog/best-fonts-dyslexia/>

**Accessible PowerPoint:** <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/topic/make-your-powerpoint-presentations-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-6f7772b2-2f33-4bd2-8ca7-dae3b2b3ef25?ui=en-us&rs=en-us&ad=us>



## Resources

### Workplace continued...

**Accessible PDF:** <https://webaim.org/techniques/acrobat/>

**Accessible Excel:** <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/topic/make-your-excel-documents-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-6cc05fc5-1314-48b5-8eb3-683e49b3e593?ui=en-us&rs=en-us&ad=usle-website-examples/>

**UD for presentations:** <https://www.washington.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-your-presentation>

### Website

**Accessible website:** <https://www.convinceandconvert.com/digital-marketing/accessibe-make-your-website-accessible/>

**20 examples of accessible websites:** <https://www.convinceandconvert.com/digital-marketing/accessib>

**Check website accessibility:** <https://ace.accessibe.com/>

### Sensory

**Sensory colours:** <https://howtoadult.com/colors-pleasing-kids-sensory-issues-17568.html>

### Language

Bottema-Beutel, K., Kapp, S. K., Lester, J. N., Sasson, N. J., & Hand, B. N. (2021). Avoiding ableist language: Suggestions for autism researchers. *Autism in Adulthood*, 3(1), 18-29.

Botha, M., Hanlon, J., & Williams, G. L. (2021). Does language matter? Identity-first versus person-first language use in autism research: A response to Vivanti. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Advanced online publication.

Hoffman, H., Hengesbach, M., & Trotter, S. (2020). Perspectives on person-first language: A focus on college students. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 33(1), 39-48.

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>