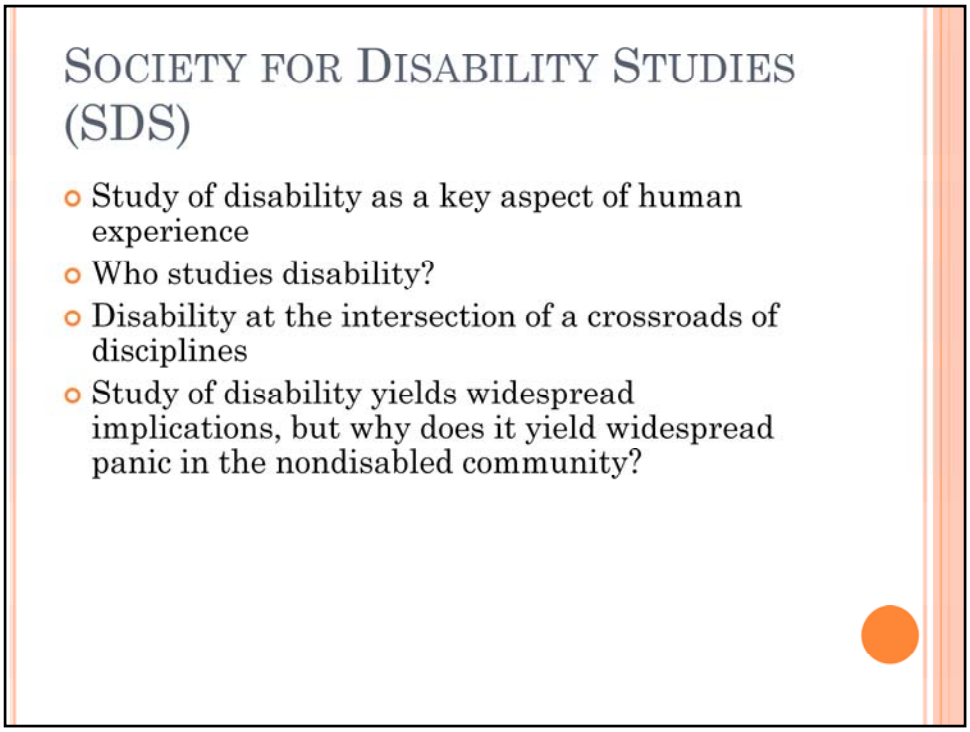
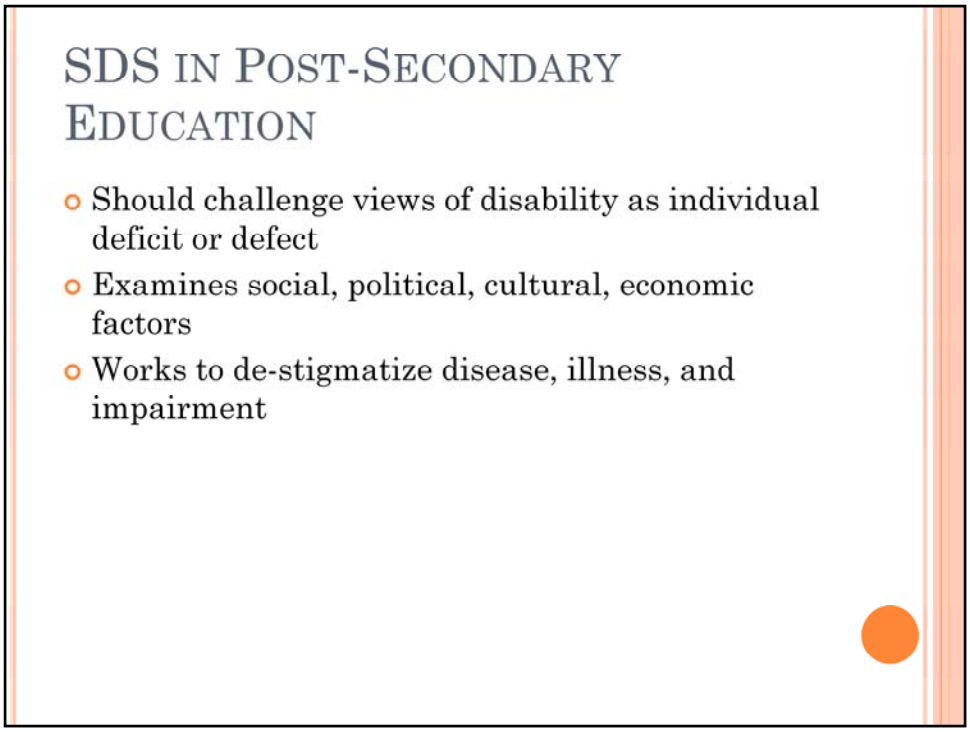
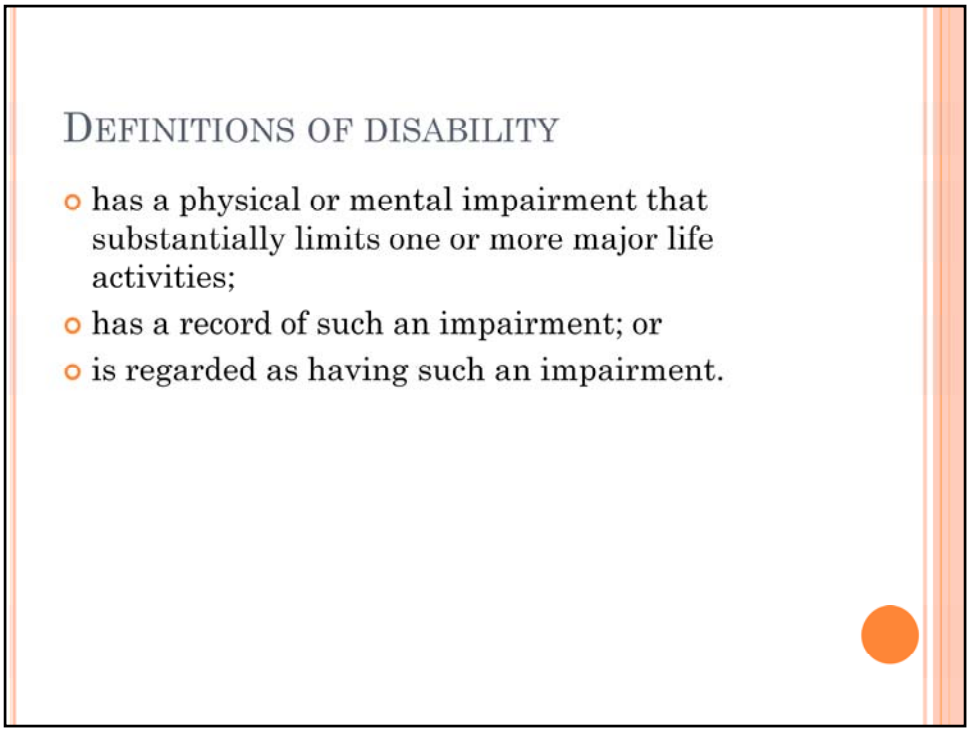

Disability and Literature
What a long strange trip it's been



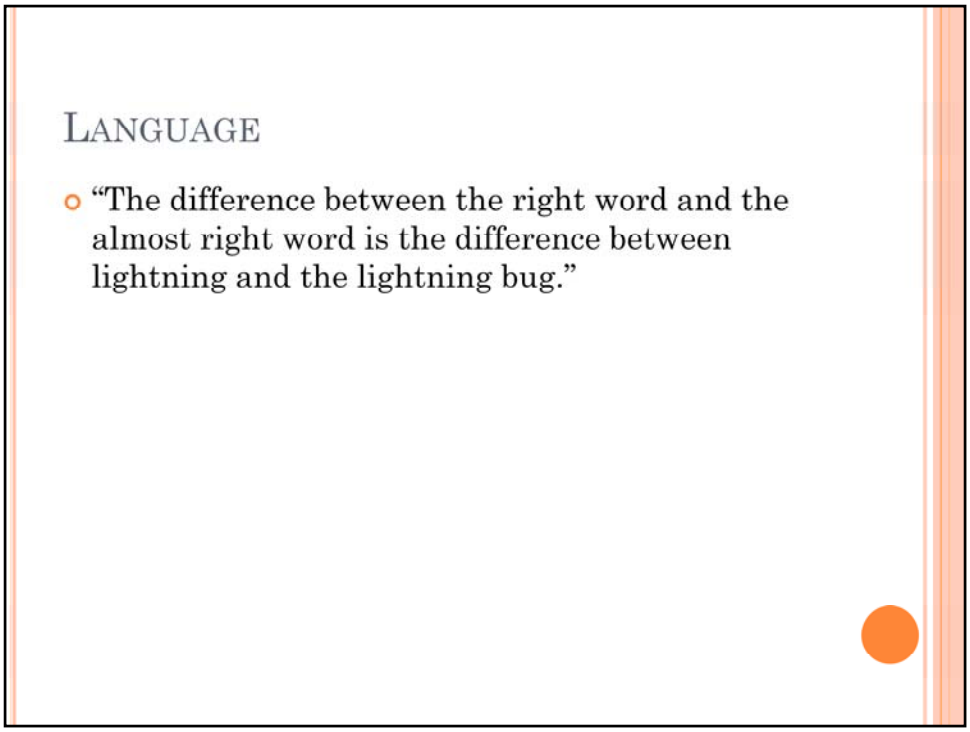
Similarities of experience and advocacy created the disability rights movement, a movement based on full participation and autonomy for people labeled with disabilities. Scholarship and theory around disability developed from this movement. Activist and author James Charleton said, “having a disability is *essentially* neither a good thing nor a bad thing. It just is.” The Society for Disability Studies invites scholars from a variety of disciplines to bring their talents and concerns to the study of disability as a key aspect of human experience on a par with race, class, gender, sex, and sexual orientation. In fact, the field owes a debt of gratitude to the groundwork laid by scholars from gender, racial, postcolonial, and queer studies. And while these studies often derive from theorists such as Derrida and Foucault, only disability stuides is universal in its application. As one of the most pervasive markers, anyone in any group could be, could have been, or could become a person with a disability, and everyone will experience some form of disability if he or she lives long enough. The study of disability has political, social, and economic import for society as a whole. The idea is that the study of disability will not only improve the lives of people with disabilities, elevating the place of disabled people within society, it has also added valuable perspective on a broad range of ideas, issues, and policies beyond the disability community. Disability sits at the center of many overlapping disciplines in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Since attitudes toward disability have not been the same across time and places, much has been gained by learning from these other experiences.



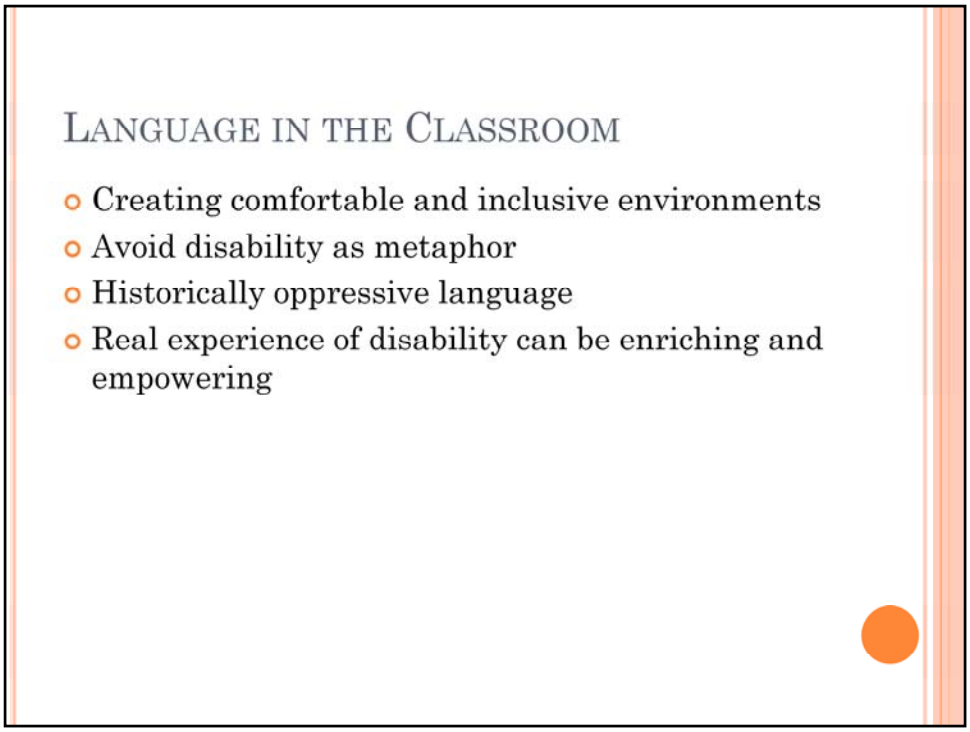
As a field of study, disability studies challenges the view of disability as an individual deficit or defect that can be remedied solely through medical intervention or rehabilitation by “experts” and other service providers. This is achieved by exploring models and theories that examine social, political, cultural, and economic factors that define disability and help determine personal and collective responses to difference. Disability Studies works to de-stigmatize disease, illness, and impairment, including those that cannot be measured or explained by biological science. Finally, while acknowledging that medical research and intervention can be useful, the study of disability interrogates the connections between medical practice and stigmatizing disability. Incorporation of disability perspectives provides students a venue to critically examine how various issues have important social and political implications on people with diverse characteristics. Moreover, disability becomes not just a topic, or an “alternative study.” Rather, it becomes a part of our everyday existence that is relevant to all of us, whether we are in the health-care setting, a business environment or in any other field. We are all born with different characteristics and encounter various circumstances (e.g., injuries, sickness, old age), but our economic and social contexts continue to favor only select forms of existence. It is vital for students to understand, critically examine and challenge such structures in the main curriculum.



What is disability? Who defines disability? Who has the right to define disability? Without minimizing the experiences of people with disabilities, it is important to recognize that disability is fundamentally about difference, not impairment, inability or inadequacy. Disability is both fluid and contextual. One person may be blind at birth, another in old age. One might be disabled by genetics, another by a ski accident. Some disabilities are visible while others are hidden. The experience might last days, weeks or a lifetime. The ADA has a three-part definition of "disability." This definition, based on the definition under the Rehabilitation Act, reflects the specific types of discrimination experienced by people with disabilities. Accordingly, it is not the same as the definition of disability in other laws, such as state workers' compensation laws or other federal or state laws that provide benefits for people with disabilities and disabled veterans. It reads [read slide] While the first two parts of the definition focus on the medical impairment, the third explicitly recognizes a definition influenced by social influences. This part of the definition makes it impossible for an individual to shape his or her own identity. Within the disability community, the term “disabled” is based on a commonality of experience, a shared history of oppression, and the identification as disabled by self or others.

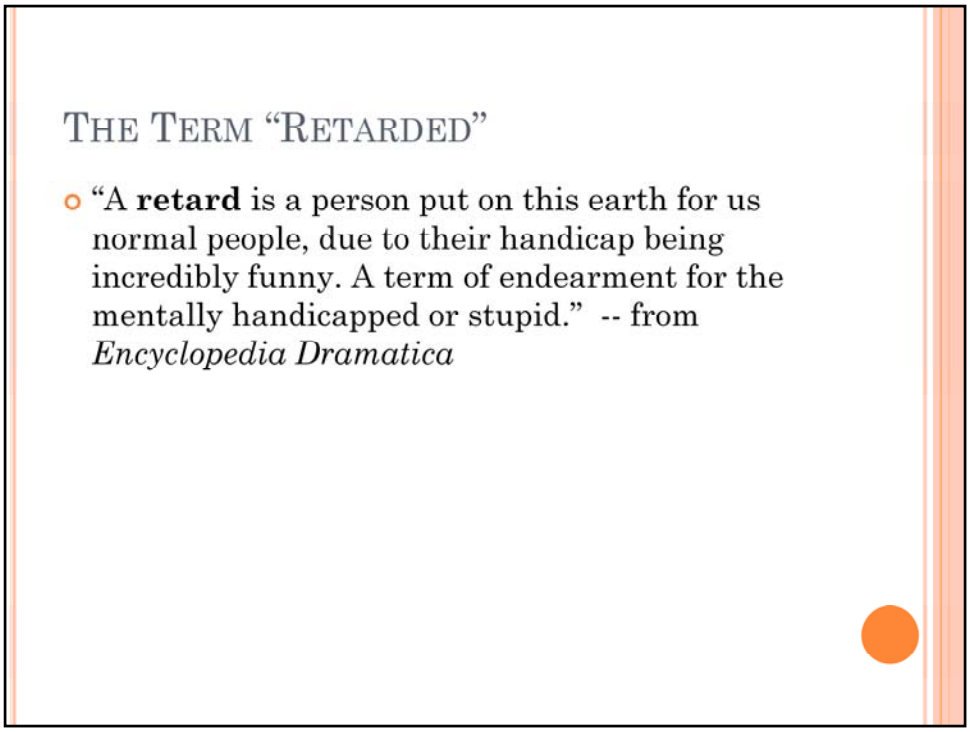


This is not about political correctness. It is about showing respect to groups by avoiding offensive language, language that has historically represented the oppression of and discrimination against marginalized groups. “Handicapped” and “disabled” are all-encompassing terms too frequently misused, reinforcing the stigma and barriers created by negative and stereotypical attitudes. Referring to people by their medical diagnoses devalues and disrespects that individual as a member of the human race. Disability labels like “handicapped” are simply sociopolitical terms that provide a legal way to access necessary services. They are not an indication of the value and potential of people with disabilities. It is important that the people within the group decide how they are portrayed and how they are signified within society.



As instructors, our job is to teach new material and prescribe new knowledge to our students. The way we choose to do this job is as significant as the educational content we are transmitting. As an instructor and a person with a disability, I feel that it is up to all of us to convey our messages in ways that create the most comfortable and inclusive environment. Our classrooms should be safe places, not places that perpetuate oppression, exclusion and discrimination. The language that we use in the classroom is imperative for achieving these goals. In the English language, using disability as a metaphor, an analogy and a derogatory term is common. Examples of such phrases and terms include: lame idea, blind justice, dumb luck, felt paralyzed, argument fell on deaf ears, crippling, crazy, insane, idiotic and retarded. Disability has negative connotations when used metaphorically, while the real experience of living with a disability can be quite enriching and empowering. In all the examples above disability is used in a value-laden way. “Lame idea” means bad idea or one that is not constructed in a sufficient and persuasive manner. When we call a notion or act “idiotic/moronic/ retarded” we are trying to convey the message that the idea or notion is ill-conceived, lacking in thought or unintelligent. When we describe someone as “blind” to a fact (for

example, men are blind to sexist practices), we mean that they are lacking knowledge or have no notion of what transpires around them. “Crazy” means excessive or without control. None of these signifying phrases carries positive and empowering interpretations. As educators, we must bear in mind that disability labels have a history, and that those labels have been highly contested over the decades. These words were actually created to describe people with different abilities as inferior within particular value systems. For instance, the words “moron,” “idiot” and “imbecile” were used throughout the 20th century as medical classifications to denote different levels of intellectual deficiency. Later on, all these terms were conflated under the umbrella of “mental retardation.”



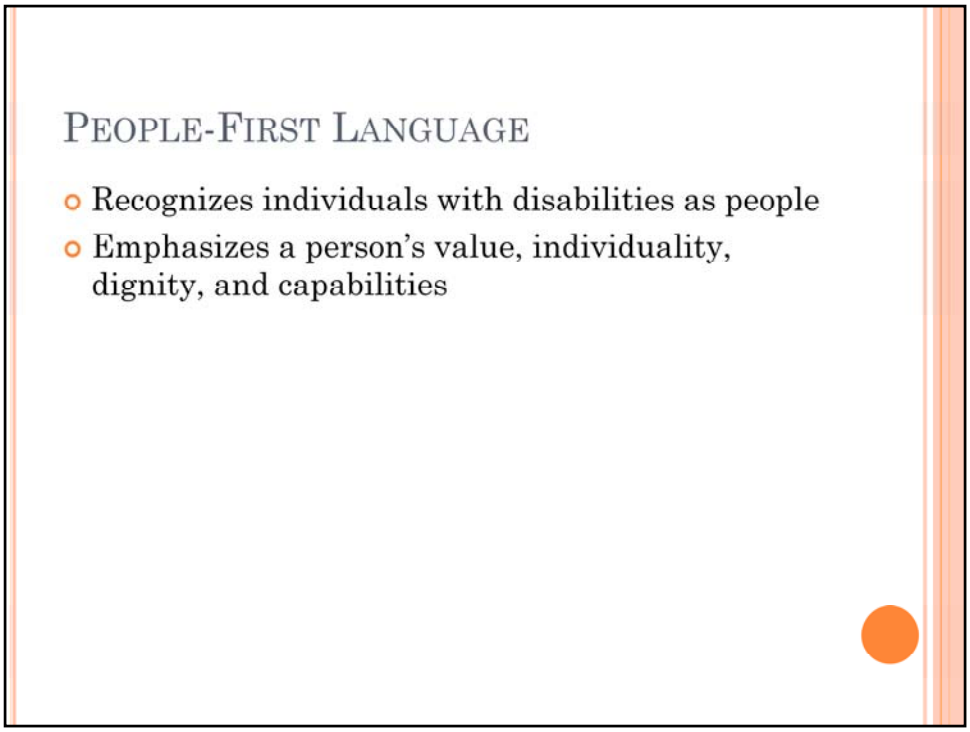
The category of mental retardation, by itself, is highly contested for its reification of all perceived differences in cognitive abilities into one unified category. The important fact here is that mental retardation is a social construction, not a real condition that is innate in people's minds. The only requirement for inclusion in this category is deviation from a norm (usually prescribed by the use of IQ test) and perceived incompetence. Mental retardation is by itself a linguistic metaphor that means "cognitively delayed." When used metaphorically in everyday speech, "retarded" stands for slow or underdeveloped thought

processes. When we use terms like "retarded," "lame" or "blind"— even if we are referring to acts or ideas and not to people at all—we perpetuate the stigma associated with disability. By using a label which is commonly associated with disabled people to denote a deficiency, a lack or an ill-conceived notion, we reproduce the oppression of people with disabilities. As educators, we must be aware of the oppressive power of "everyday" language and try to change it.

Perpetuating the Myth

- Handicap = "hand in cap"

As discussed earlier, the ADA provides a standard, legal definition of disability, but "disability" can be succinctly defined as a body function that operates differently. Contrast that meaning with the Oxford English Dictionary's etymology of "handicap," which states that the term derived from "hand in cap" – a game where the losing player was considered to be at a disadvantage. Then consider the legend of "handicap," which claims that the term was coined to describe people with disabilities who had to beg on the street corner with their "cap in hand."



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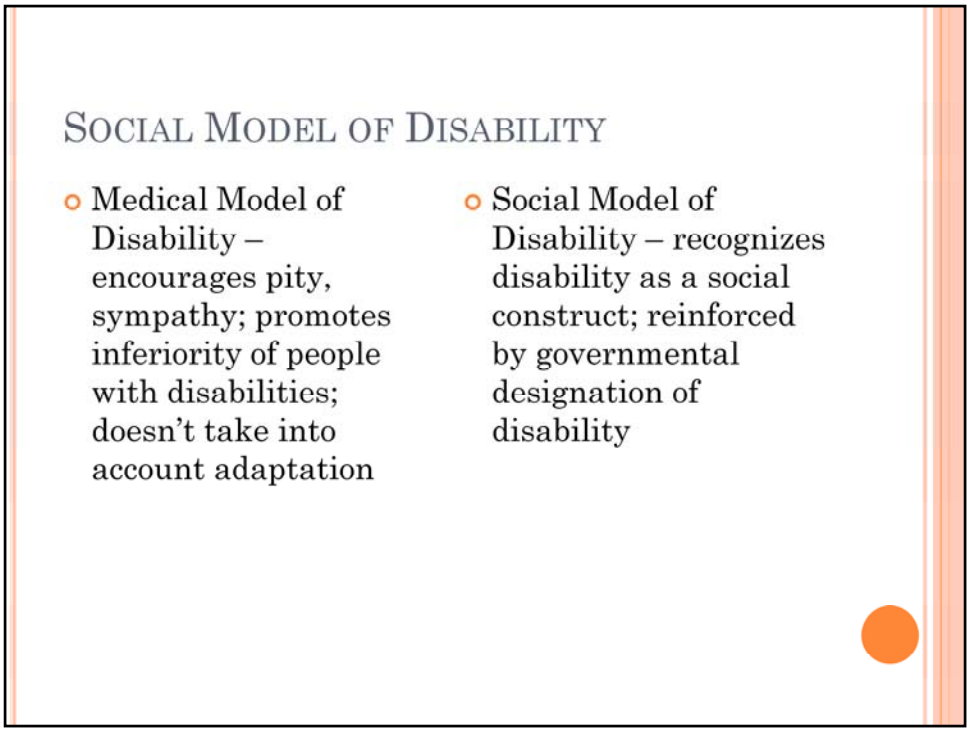
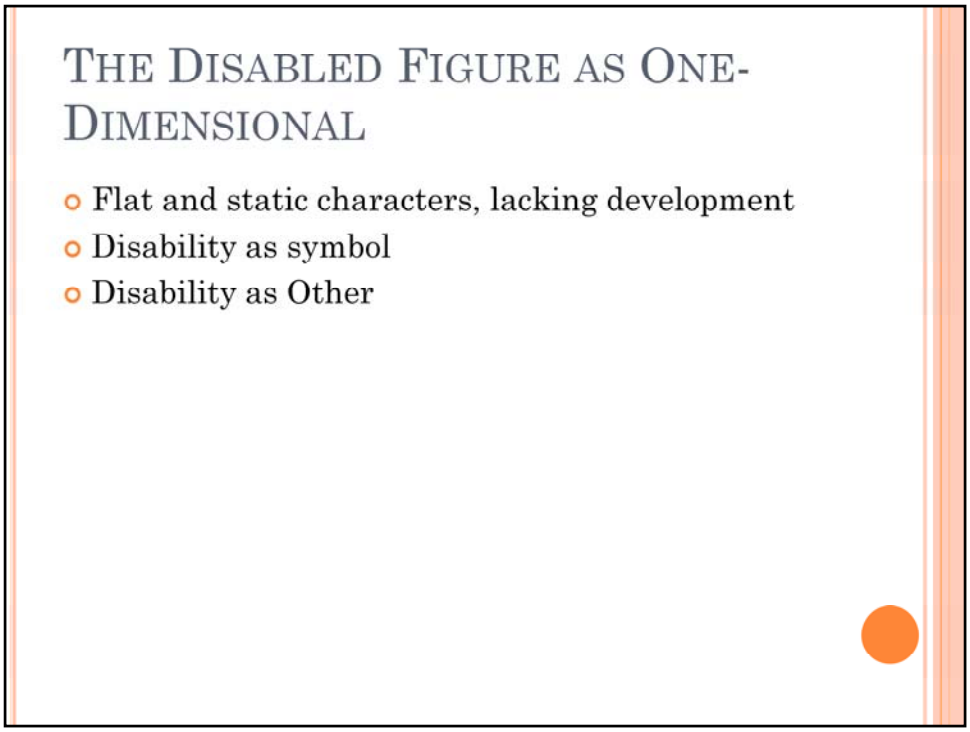
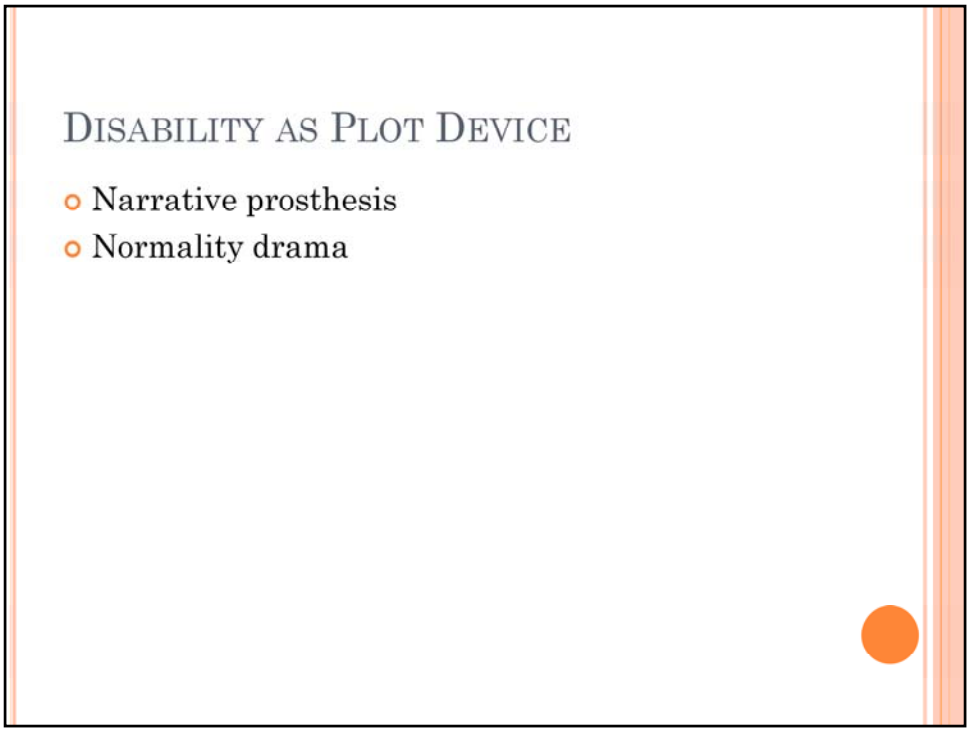


Throughout history, people with disabilities have frequently been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared and ignored. They have been portrayed as helpless victims, repulsive adversaries, heroic individuals overcoming tragedy, or charity cases who depended on others for their well being and care. Media coverage has frequently featured heartwarming and inspirational stories that, perhaps while well intended, unfortunately have too often resulted in reinforced stereotypes that patronize and underestimate the capabilities of individuals with disabilities. These negative significations of disability in society promote disability as social inferiority and people with disabilities as targets for a cure. In the Medical Model of disability, the individual with a disability is defined by his or her impairment. The Social Model of disability posits that fulfilling the "normal" role models in society helps constitute a person's identity, alienating those who do not mentally or physically match up to these preconceived ideals. The definition of disability as an unexpected differentness makes some roles impossible or at the least quite difficult to carry out. Changing these role expectations will end ableism, the discrimination based on disability. The analysis of social roles and attitudes toward the failure to fulfill them results in the alteration of negative attitudes and behavior toward people with disabilities.

Despite the long-standing history of the underrepresentation of minorities in literature, people with disabilities have endured a plethora of representations in visual and discursive works, a persistent overrepresentation. Consequently, the marginalization of people with disabilities has occurred in the midst of a perpetual circulation of their images. From Oedipus to Ahab to (?), the disabled literary figure has populated pages, playing on readers' preconceived, uninformed perceptions of disability. Authors have traditionally used and abused the concept of disability merely as a literary convenience, a handy metaphor for Otherness or for alternative social disturbance. Literature would not be literature without conflict. It has been noted differences in gender, race, and sexual orientation have often been demonized by marking those groups with physical or intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, nondisabled individuals have historically defined themselves as normal by using disability as a universal metaphor for abnormality. This suggests that if people with disabilities did not exist, the nondisabled would have to invent them. Rather than presenting an empowered literary disabled figure, literature has largely perpetuated the oppression of the Disabled by delineating their inferior role in society. As such, literary representation of the Disabled largely works to reinforce perception of the Disabled as the malevolent Other.

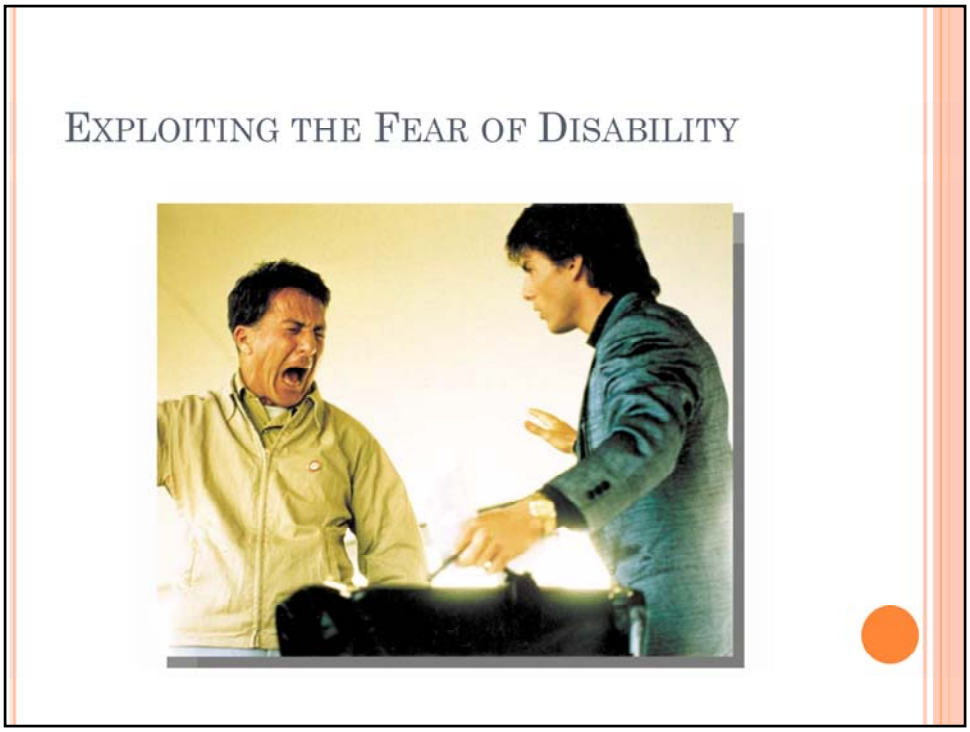


Not surprisingly, characters with disabilities are almost always represented in fiction as flat and static. Because they most often function as symbols, their perspectives are not developed and are unimportant to the development of the plot. Physical aberration in a literary character is indicative of mental, emotional, social, and/or spiritual aberration. Physical difference is used to mark the outsider or the monster. Moby Dick's Ahab rages while the deaf narrator in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is isolated and dying unseen. Dracula and his heirs, including the Twilight series, are pigment deficient, dentally freakish, and daylight-challenged – in the best nineteenth-century tradition of the "freak" sideshow. These figures, in literature as in real life, allow nondisabled people to shiver with horror as they congratulate themselves on their own normality. Because of his or her convenient symbolism, a disabled character with a full voice, complex personality, and identity defined outside of disability is difficult to find.



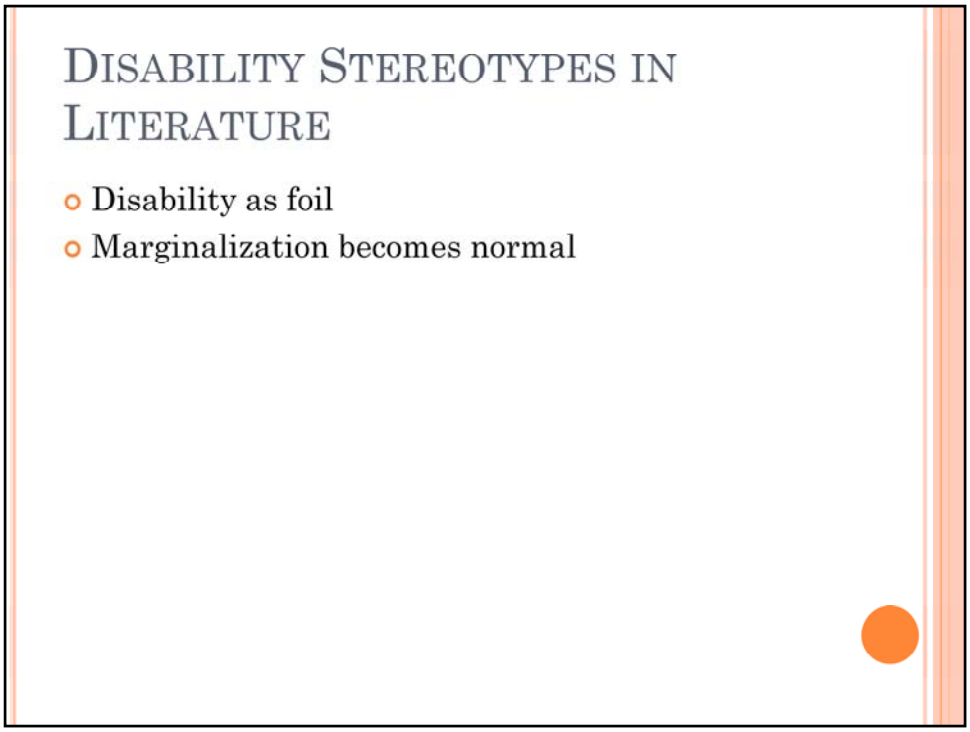
Literary texts are not usually about people with disabilities themselves or about how disability is an integral aspect of all of our lives. Instead, they often feature mainstream perspectives on impairment and difference while using disability as a plot device. Mitchell and Snyder call this a *narrative prosthesis*. Disability is reduced to a tool; writers and producers disregard the lived experiences of people with disabilities and perpetuate the idea that those with disabilities are abnormal, presumably unlike nondisabled people. Thus, many narratives involving disability become sentimentalized accounts of

overcoming disability or stories of people with disabilities living tragic lives. What is the effect of using disability as a plot device? While some may say it simply tells an intriguing or exciting story, the use of disability also creates what Paul Darke (1998) identified as the *normality drama*. In it, the "central theme is not the impairment or the abnormality but the degree to which it can either define or validate its opposite: normality." In such narratives, the character with a disability affirms normality by making the lead nondisabled characters look like compassionate individuals or by teaching them valuable life lessons. Once the character with a disability has fulfilled her or his role, s/he is literally removed. The message sent is that disability or other differences from "normal" have no place in society and must be eliminated.



In *Rain Man* (Guber, 1988), Tom Cruise's character, shallow playboy Charlie Babbit, represents normality. His brother Raymond Babbit, played by Dustin Hoffman, performs some of the stereotypical characteristics of the autistic savant. Throughout the film the cynical and frenetic Charlie learns to appreciate life and love his brother after road tripping with Raymond and getting to know his presumably simple ways. Raymond humanizes his brother; Charlie becomes deep and caring through this relationship. When Charlie turns this new leaf, Raymond, having fulfilled his purpose in the film, is sent back to the institution.

Viewers accept this because while they appreciate Raymond's supposed simplicity, they also fear his outbursts. They condescendingly accept him but are led to believe that people with autism or other disabilities have no place in society. The inhumanity of large institutions and the successes of school and community inclusion clearly show that this is not the case. However, audiences leave the movie thinking that institutionalization is really for Raymond's own good rather than about society's discomfort with difference.



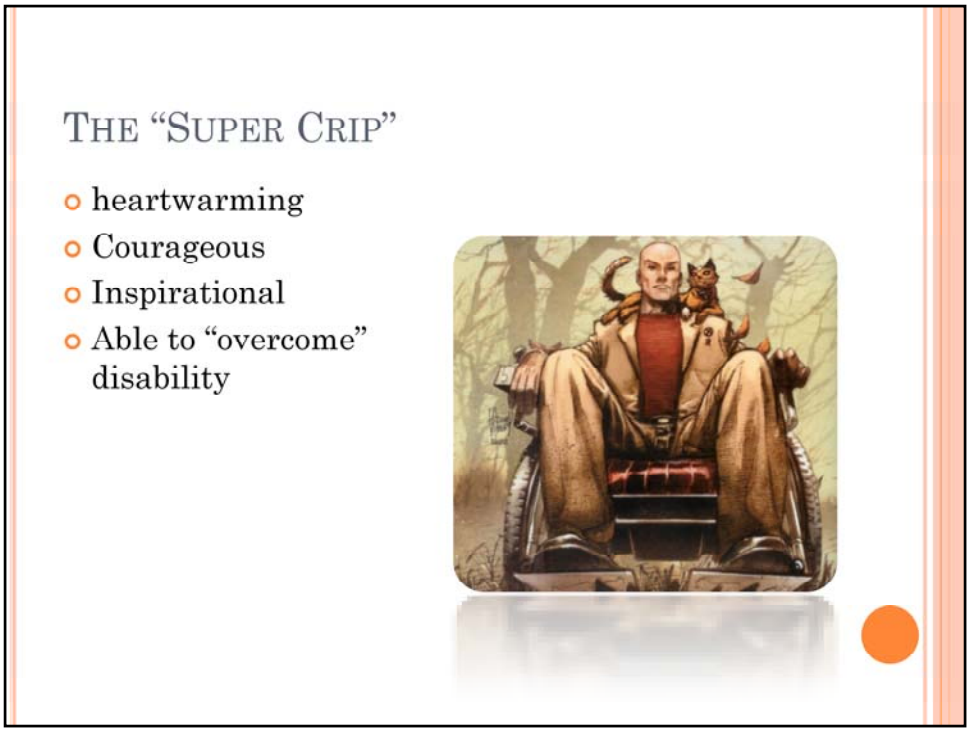
Since many characters with disabilities simply serve the purpose of humanizing the other characters, the characters with disabilities often become one-dimensional and cliché. People with disabilities in narratives are usually objects of pity; tragic victims; humorous subjects; dangerous or malevolent criminals; monsters; or revenge-seeking malcontents. There are few alternatives to these repeated representations that marginalize characters with disabilities; thus, their marginalization seems to be the natural order of things.

The Sweet Innocent

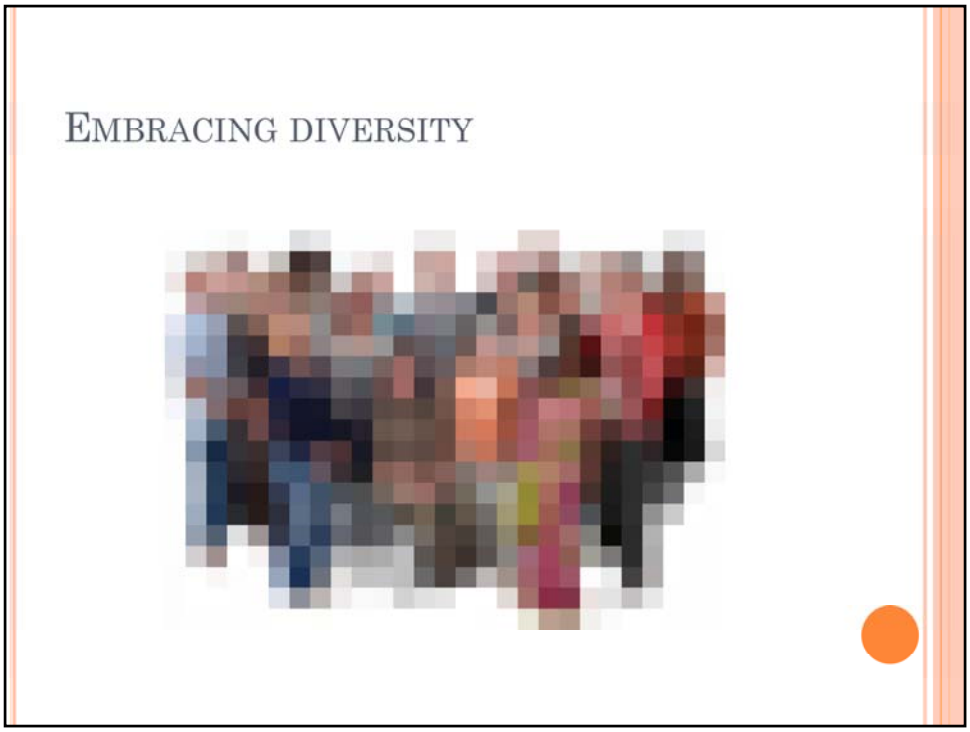
- Eternal child
- "special"
- Helpless
- Dependent on nondisabled

The "sweet innocent" presents a character in which an adult with a disability is considered an eternal child, tragically "special" and/or wholly innocent. Such characters often come with over-protective parents who may espouse that their adult son or daughter really has the mental age of a child. This characterization simplifies and infantilizes people with disabilities and sets low expectations for them, denying them the rights of adulthood. Further, it perpetuates the belief that mental age is a useful concept and that intelligence can be discretely measured.

In another common stereotype, the presence of disability in a character represents evil or criminal intent. Consider the following disabled characters: Richard III, Captain Ahab, and Mr. Shiftlet. All five seek revenge against the nondisabled world or their disabling agents, obsessively focusing on their impairments as tragedies that must be avenged. Norden aptly called this the "obsessive avenger." Disability is a negative marker for these characters and is represented as ugly, abnormal and immoral. The unmarked, nondisabled characters in many of these narratives seem ideal compared to their disabled counterparts. They often attempt to save the day by transforming, banishing or killing the villains so that disability is removed and normality is restored.



Lastly, let us explore the concept of the *super crip*, used extensively in news media stories about people with disabilities. This is the classic "heartwarming" tale about "courageous" people with disabilities who are "inspirational" in their efforts to "overcome" their disabilities against all odds. While this seems complementary and unproblematic on the surface, it reveals underlying assumptions presuming the incompetence of people with disabilities. The *super crip* representation fails to interrupt the assumption that people with disabilities are incapable. It does not recognize the social and physical barriers imposed upon people with impairments that make them disabled. These stories ignore these barriers, accepting them and overly lauding individuals for their accomplishments. Instead of actually complimenting these individuals, *super crip* stories often reveal low expectations for people with disabilities.



Classrooms that truly embrace diversity inherently convey to all students that they belong as they are. It is crucial to recognize that disability is indeed an important aspect of diversity. Too often diversity is framed along race and gender identities. While these are obviously imperative, this conception often fails

to include class, culture, sexual orientation and dis/ability identities, which are important aspects of all of our lives.

Employing culturally relevant teaching allows us to address, value and build upon the lived experiences of all of our students. When facilitating discussions and sharing examples in class, we must be sure to address the variety of experiences of all of our students. We can and should teach our students to critique literature that embraces oppressive norms as the natural order of things. In short, we can create a space that embraces all of the differences in the class community.

When referring to people with disabilities,
choose words that reflect dignity and respect, such as:

Inappropriate language	Appropriate language
the disabled	people with disabilities, the disability community (disabled, an adjective, must be accompanied by a noun)
the blind, the deaf	the blind community, the Deaf community
crippled, suffers from, afflicted with, stricken with, victim of, invalid	has a disability, is a person with a disability, physically disabled, walks with a cane, uses leg braces
normal person, healthy, whole	non-disabled, able-bodied, person without disabilities
impaired, impairment	disabled, has a disability
handicap parking, disabled parking	accessible parking, disability parking
wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair person	wheelchair user, person who uses a wheelchair
paraplegic, quadriplegic	man with paraplegia, woman who is paralyzed, person with spinal cord injury
hearing impaired, hearing impairment	deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened
visually impaired, visual impairment	low vision, partially sighted, blind
dumb, mute	person who is unable to speak, has difficulty speaking, uses synthetic speech, is non-vocal, non-verbal
stutterer, tongue-tied	person who has a speech or communication disability
CP victim, spastic	person with cerebral palsy
epileptic	person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder
fit, attack	seizure, epileptic episode or event
crazy, insane, nuts, psycho	person with mental illness, person living with mental illness
retard, mentally defective, moron, imbecile, Down's person, mongoloid	person with an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability
slow learner, retarded	has a learning disability, person with specific learning disability, person with ADHD

dwarf, midget	person of small stature, short stature; little person
birth defect	congenital disability, disabled from birth
post-polio, suffered from polio	person who had polio, person with post polio syndrome, polio survivor
homebound	stay-at-home, hard for the person to get out

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