





## The Words We Currently Avoid

**Nonverbal** From the root *verbum*, or “language,” the word **nonverbal** assumes that someone cannot understand or use *language* (as opposed to speech). It also suggests this status is unchangeable. These ideas are untrue and, for many, lead to the denial of AAC.

⇒ *Instead, use:* **AAC user** or **person who needs AAC** or **nonspeaking** (for autistic people)

**Severe** or **profound** These words are not positive. They make it harder to imagine a disabled person as a friend, ally, classmate, leader, or neighbor. They invoke feelings of fear and pity, not common humanity. Nor do they communicate what the person actually needs.

⇒ *Instead:* Describe the person’s specific needs

**Disorders, impairments, or deficits** Disability is a natural part of human diversity. No form of communication is wrong. Plus, all communication is two-way: it’s an act we do together, not something we have.

⇒ *Instead, use:* **condition** or **disability**

**Complex communication needs** We view this as similar to the term **special needs**. We have the same needs as everyone else to be heard and understood. That need is neither complex nor special.

⇒ *Instead:* Describe our access needs directly and avoid euphemisms

**Non-communicative** Everyone communicates. It is impossible to know whether someone “has no language.”

⇒ *Instead:* Describe and respect the ways we already communicate

**Behaviors** Labeling unexpected, unfamiliar, or unwanted human movement as **behaviors** erases and dehumanizes the person behind the movement.

⇒ *Instead:* Say “**she acts in ways that communicate her needs because she has no other way to communicate.**”

**Clients, consumers, or patients** CommunicationFIRST, a disability-led organization, does not generally use these terms because they can be “othering” and dehumanizing.

**Communicative competence** While the ideas behind the “communicative competence” framework are helpful, the term begs the question whether someone is a “competent communicator” or an “**incompetent communicator.**” When someone is seen as “**communicatively incompetent,**” they’re more likely to be *denied* access to robust, language-based AAC.

If you have a speech-related disability, please let us know what you think and what terms you prefer by filling out this [short survey](#). We value your opinion—thank you for helping us improve this resource with your input!