

Article of the Week #1: Why Using the Word “Retard” is Retarding Progress

By Tim O’Donoghue in *Millennials, Values*, July 2012

1 My younger brother Aidan started high school
2 this year, and unlike his male predecessors, he
3 loves it. He has friends, he’s involved, and he loves
4 his teachers. Aidan has been anxiously waiting for
5 this juncture of his life for years, which was
6 probably fueled by all those Nick-at-Nite TV
7 shows. (Unfortunately, high school isn’t quite
8 Drake and Josh or that pre-pregnancy Jamie Lynn
9 Spears show.) Aidan wasn’t the only anxious one
10 though. All those years Aidan spent in excitement,
11 I spent in fear. I spent my freshman year in the
12 same halls as Aidan, overwhelmed by the sheer
13 size of the school. The whole social thing just
14 wasn’t for me. My friend Ben likes to tell me it’s a
15 confidence thing and I think he’s right. Round two
16 was different though — Aidan is a completely
17 different competitor. Still, I had no confidence. I
18 had no confidence that his peers would treat him
19 with the respect that he deserves, or even worse,
20 simply as an equal. Aidan has Down syndrome,
21 and it can be hard to see past that label.

22 I’m going to take a minute and diverge from
23 Aidan’s story. I need to rationalize my fear. My
24 entire life I’ve played witness to the continuous
25 (and usually subconscious) relegation of people
26 with disabilities. It’s an unfortunate habit passed
27 down by our parents, and spread among
28 millennials. It’s as simple as saying “Wasn’t that
29 class retarded?” I bet if Aidan hadn’t been a part of
30 my life, or had been born without Down syndrome,
31 I’d be throwing the term *retarded* around like a
32 baseball. So when I hear “retarded,” is my first
33 reaction, “Hey you! You’re systemically
34 oppressing persons with cognitive disabilities
35 through your language!”? Of course not, because I
36 don’t think most people realize that that is what
37 they’re doing. It’s a word that has become so
38 ingrained in our vocabulary that we think it’s
39 disassociated with
40 its roots.

41 Often, when I ask someone not to say *retarded*,
42 they’ll come back and say that it just means
43 “stupid,” or “it’s a medical term!” or “I didn’t use
44 it in that context.” To put it gently, any response in

45 the negative simply shows ignorance. Stupid?
46 Well, that’s simply not the definition of “retarded.”
47 Use the word *stupid*. Medical term? Not anymore.
48 The term “retard” has been removed from both
49 government and medical texts. You used it out of
50 context? That works. If I were to use a racial slur
51 out of context, that’d be ok too, right? “But there’s
52 a history attached to racial slurs!” There’s a history
53 attached to people of disabilities, too. People with
54 disabilities were for all intents and purposes denied
55 education until, funnily enough, the U.S. Supreme
56 Court decided *Brown vs. Board of Education in*
57 *1954*. This was only the beginning. It was not until
58 the early 1970s that true strides were made for
59 persons with disabilities.

60 And it’s not only the classroom that has held
61 back disabled individuals. People with disabilities
62 were subject to Nazi eugenics and murdered en
63 masse. This wasn’t the first instance of eugenics in
64 the history of persons with disabilities. Before that,
65 Americans practiced their own eugenics on people
66 with disabilities, and frequently isolated and
67 institutionalized anyone who looked or acted
68 differently.

69 So, back to Aidan. Aidan loves public school,
70 and I attest much of that to his peers that I feared
71 so much. Aidan, through his vivacious,
72 charismatic, and loving nature, has surrounded
73 himself with an amazing group of friends. He
74 joined the track and wrestling team, was in a
75 school play, read a poem at the poetry slam, and
76 sang “Soul Man” at the school talent show, fedora
77 and all (big props to his Best Buddy Andrew on
78 that one — someone needed to be John Belushi,
79 and it sure wasn’t me). All of this is to say that
80 we’re getting there, but we haven’t gotten there
81 yet. The “r” word is still commonplace in our
82 vocabulary. Like I said, Aidan is a happy kid. But
83 if you say “retard,” or mention his disability, he
84 goes straight to thumb sucking. His life-long sign
85 for “I’m uncomfortable.” What does that tell you?
86 It has to stop. “Retard” is retarding our progress
87 towards true acceptance. Spread the word to end
88 the word.

1. **BEFORE YOU READ:** Read the *title*. In a complete sentence, predict what you think this article will be about.

2. Read through the article slowly and carefully using these symbols to annotate (mark) the text:

✓ I already know about this.

⊕ This is new to me.

? I don't understand the meaning of...

! I think that...

😊 I'd like to know more about this.

* This is important!

X I disagree with...

???

I have NO clue what this passage is about.

3. Skim through the article again. HIGHLIGHT 2 unfamiliar words. Read the sentences around the word and use context clues to determine the meaning. Write the three words and their possible meanings here:

Word #1: _____ *What do you think this word means?*

Word #2: _____ *What do you think this word means?*

4. Reread lines 31 & 32. Copy the sentence here:

What type of figurative language does the author use?

5. Reread lines 60-68. What types of books would you look in for more information about the topic in this paragraph?

6. Was the author of this article convincing in his arguments to stop using "retarded" to label those with disabilities? **Yes** or **no**? *Why* or *why not*?
