

Strengths-Based Language in IEPs

Purpose & Overview

IEPs that focus only on deficits can feel like a list of problems, creating a negative tone that frustrates families and demoralizes students. Strengths-based language reframes needs as opportunities for growth, highlights student abilities, and sets a positive, collaborative tone.

This worksheet provides **sentence stems, before/after examples, and practical tools** to help educators write IEPs that are compliant, professional, and uplifting—without sugarcoating or ignoring areas of need.

Why Strengths-Based Language Matters

- **Compliance:** IDEA requires strengths to be documented in Present Levels.
 - **Trust:** Families see a balanced, student-centered perspective.
 - **Student Engagement:** Students are more motivated when IEPs reflect their abilities and interests.
 - **Clarity:** Positive, precise language communicates the same information more effectively than deficit-only descriptions.
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Key Shifts in Language

Deficit-Focused	Strengths-Based Reframe
“Student can’t stay on task.”	“Student stays engaged for 5 minutes during high-interest tasks and benefits from structured breaks.”
“Student is disruptive during class.”	“Student responds well to clear expectations and benefits from frequent opportunities for movement and choice.”

“Student struggles with reading comprehension.”	“Student demonstrates strong recall of main ideas when visuals are provided and benefits from pre-teaching of key vocabulary.”
“Student has poor social skills.”	“Student enjoys group activities and benefits from structured opportunities to practice peer interactions with support.”
“Student refuses to write.”	“Student expresses ideas verbally and benefits from supports such as speech-to-text or graphic organizers to transfer ideas to writing.”

Sentence Stems for Strengths-Based Writing

Strengths Section

- “Student demonstrates strengths in ____.”
- “Student is motivated by ____.”
- “Student benefits from ____.”
- “Student shows progress when ____.”

Needs/Impact Section

- “When tasks require ____, Student benefits from ____.”
- “Student requires ____ to access grade-level ____.”
- “Without support, Student is likely to ____; with support, Student ____.”

Goal Alignment

- “Because Student can ____ with support, the IEP team will target ____ to increase independence.”

- “Student’s interest in ____ will be incorporated into instruction to support growth in ____.”
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PLAAFP Rewrites: Before & After

Before (Deficit-Focused):

“Student cannot transition without teacher assistance and often refuses to move to the next activity.”

After (Strengths-Based):

“Student responds well to consistent routines and benefits from visual schedules and verbal countdowns, which support smooth transitions. With these supports, Student transitions successfully 3 out of 5 times.”

Strengths-Based Goal Examples

Reading

- “From a baseline of 60 CWPM, Student will increase fluency to 100 CWPM with $\geq 95\%$ accuracy on grade-level passages, capitalizing on Student’s strong visual memory for high-frequency words.”

Writing

- “Given a graphic organizer and Student’s preference for science topics, Student will compose a 5-sentence paragraph with topic, details, and conclusion in 4 of 5 opportunities.”

Behavior/SEL

- “Student will independently use a taught self-regulation strategy (movement, breathing, or sensory tool) to return to task within 5 minutes in 4 of 5 opportunities, building on Student’s ability to recognize emotional states with visual cues.”

Social Skills

- “During structured group activities, Student will initiate a peer interaction using a taught sentence stem in 4 of 5 opportunities, leveraging Student’s enjoyment of partner activities.”
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Strengths-Based Feedback for Families

- Instead of: *“He’s behind in everything.”*
 - Try: *“He is showing growth in decoding and benefits from structured phonics support. We’ll continue to target comprehension so he can better connect ideas across texts.”*
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Implementation Tips

- **Balance:** Always pair a challenge with at least one strength or support.
 - **Evidence:** Use specific data to show strengths (“recalls 12/15 sight words”) rather than generic praise.
 - **Voice:** Include direct student quotes or family priorities for authenticity.
 - **Consistency:** Ensure every section (PLAAFP, goals, services) uses strengths-based framing.
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Action Starter: Try Tomorrow

- Take one current IEP and highlight all **deficit-only statements**.
- Rewrite each using a **strengths-based stem** and link it to data or supports.
- Share with a colleague to compare tone and clarity.

