

Inclusive Language

Operational definition: Inclusive language is the intentional use of language that “acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities” (Linguistic Society of America, 2016) It aims to avoid causing exclusion, harm, overgeneralization, and misrepresentation of people who often experience marginalization or dismissiveness from the main cultural environment.

Who Are These People?

1. Racially or ethnically marginalized communities
2. LGBTQIA+ populations
3. People marginalized based on national identity and religion
4. People with health and quality of life concerns

General Recommendations

The University of Leeds (2024) summarizes the language that should be avoided. It includes language that:

- Reinforces stereotypes or derogatory terms.
- Patronizes or trivializes groups of people.
- Excludes certain groups of people.
- Causes discomfort or offense.
- Groups together all people within a specific category.

Since language constantly evolves, words, sentences, and idioms considered common usage can cause conflict and misunderstanding. Inclusive language promotes diversity and equality in personal, academic, and professional contexts. In case of doubt, it is recommended to consult the Press Stylebook (2022) by the Associated Press or the resources available in The Diversity Style Guide (2024) by the Society of Professional Journalists.

Leading Strategies for Using Inclusive Language

1. Avoiding Derogative Language

Language carries many connotations derived from historical or contextual circumstances. Some of these connotations are so common that, in general, people use them without a second thought. For example, people who had no trouble managing the regular infrastructure of a college would have no problem **standing up for their positions**. In contrast, people who use a wheelchair would prefer to **defend their positions**. Empathy is crucial to avoid diminishing the perception of the people around us.

The following examples are just a small selection of language that can be avoided.

DEROGATIVE LANGUAGE	INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE
wheelchair-bound	wheelchair user
Jews	Jewish people, people who practice Judaism
old people	people of 60 years or more
prostitute	sex worker

2. Person-First Versus Identity-First Language

Language, like people, is complicated. In the same way that a speaker can use different styles, people could hold different identities, and focusing on one of them could cause misunderstanding, discomfort, offense, or minimization. For this reason, the Linguistic Society of America proposes the person-first language.

Person-first language is a strategy for centering the person in the conversation instead of their circumstances or identity. This strategy could be applied to everyone discussed in the above-numbered list. The following examples are illustrative but not exhaustive.

IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE	PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE
mentally ill	a person living with a mental illness
drug user	a person with substance use disorder
autistic	a person living with autism
physically challenged	a person with a disability
homeless people	people experiencing homelessness

3. Gender-Neutral Language

In some instances, some characteristics of the individual are irrelevant to the discussion. However, cultural norms have applied unnecessary gender distinctions to some professions. In many situations, when a person's identity is not known, relevant, or specific or lies beyond the current gender binary, it is acceptable to use the singular they or other general plural known forms. The following examples are instructive but not comprehensive.

GENDERED OPTION	GENDER NEUTRAL OPTION
firemen	firefighters
Congressmen	member of the Congress
stewardess	flight attendant
chairwoman	chairperson

Please remember that these options are used when the identity is not relevant, known, or specific. If a company is looking for a **chairperson** and manages to employ someone named Mary Jones, who identifies as a woman, her title should be **chairwoman**.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

There are so many strategies for promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion, and they encompass such a wide range of human experiences that an exhaustive exploration of them could take years. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions while applying these language strategies:

- 1. What happens if I make a mistake?** Mistakes are human. The same empathy that motivates the use of this language could be applied to you: acknowledge your mistake, learn from it, and try again.
- 2. How can I know if I should apply a gender-neutral option if I am unfamiliar with the person?** Asking is always a good way to solve this situation. The more we use these options, the easier it will be to use them on future occasions.
- 3. This is the first time I have interacted with someone of this situation, religion, or ethnicity, and I am afraid of making a mistake, what should I do?** It happens to the best of us. Take a moment, do not make assumptions, avoid stereotypes, and ask for more information if you are so inclined.

To Learn More

American Psychological Association. (2021). *Inclusive Language Guide*.

<https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines>

Associated Press. (2022). *The Associated Press Stylebook* (56th Edition). <https://www.apstylebook.com/>

Leal-Isida, R., González Barranco, A. & Carrizales Guerra, Y. M. (2023). *Guías del Centro de Escritura. Orientaciones para desarrollar textos y discursos académicos y profesionales*. Editorial Digital Tecnológico de Monterrey. <https://hdl.handle.net/11285/651249>

Linguistic Society of America. (2016). *Guidelines for Inclusive Language*. <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/guidelines-inclusive-language>

Society of Professional Journalists. (2024). *Resources*. The Diversity Style Guide. <https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/resources/>

University of Leeds. (2024). *Inclusive Language Guidance*. <https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/support-and-resources/inclusive-language-guidance/>



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