



Inclusive Language Guide

Inclusive Language Guide

Inclusive language fosters a respectful and welcoming environment by acknowledging and respecting diverse identities. As language constantly evolves, it's essential to recognize the power of words and prioritize people. This guide provides the best practices and tips for incorporating inclusive language into our work and daily lives.

Guidelines

1. Practice Empathy, Humility, and an Open Mindset

Consider the perspective and feelings of others when choosing your words. Choose language that is kind, respectful, and inclusive. Mistakes can and will happen.

2. Continuously Educate Yourself

Language related to diversity evolves. To promote inclusivity, staying informed about these changes and regularly updating your language to use respectful, modern terms while avoiding outdated or offensive ones is essential.

3. Be Specific and Accurate

When describing someone's background or identity, be specific and use accurate terms preferred by the individual or group. Researching and using appropriate, current language shows respect and helps accurately represent diverse experiences, contributing to a more inclusive environment.

4. Promote Inclusivity and Accessibility

Inclusive language involves using words and phrases that make everyone feel welcome and valued, regardless of their background, identity, or abilities. It requires being mindful of diversity and avoiding language that could be exclusionary or offensive, ensuring accessibility for all.

5. Engage in Self-Reflection

Reflect on the origins and impact of words and phrases, considering whether more inclusive options exist. Many terms are used without thought, but analyzing their origins can reveal potential harm to others, helping foster more thoughtful and inclusive communication.

6. Value Cultural Humility

Cultural humility is based on a "lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the physician-patient dynamic, and developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations." (Advancing Health Equity, CDC). It's important to exercise discretion during the writing process based on the context and the audience. While the goal is to use respectful, culturally sensitive terminology, preserving the integrity of original sources when referencing them is equally essential. Changing terms in quotes, surveys, guidance documents, reference materials, or cultural references may misrepresent or lose original meaning and context. Carefully consider when it is appropriate to adapt language and when it is essential to maintain the original terminology. Provide clarification or framing, if necessary, to maintain accuracy and inclusiveness.

Key Principles and Associated Terms

Key principles	Instead of this ...	State this ...
Use appropriate, non-stigmatizing substance-related terminology. When discussing addiction or substance use disorders, it's essential to use language that is respectful, accurate, and free from judgment. Using person-first language and avoiding terms that label or blame helps reduce stigma and promotes dignity. Compassionate, substance-related terminology supports more inclusive and effective prevention and treatment efforts. For more information, review the Addiction Language Guide from Shatterproof.	Abuse, Drug problem, Habit/ Drug habit, Dependence	- Substance use disorder - when referring to DSM conditions - Addiction - for a lay-friendly general term to describe substance use disorder - Misuse - when referencing the specific use of substances or classes of substances that require a distinction between misuse and use (for example, prescription drug misuse or alcohol misuse among adults); misuse should not be used when referencing underage use of alcohol or illicit drugs - Use – when referencing underage use of a substance or illicit drugs (for example, underage alcohol use, underage marijuana use, illicit drug use, heroin use, methamphetamine use) - Used other than prescribed (for prescription medications) - Harmful, hazardous, problematic, or risky use

Key principles	Instead of this ...	State this ...
Avoid the use of adjectives such as vulnerable, marginalized, and high-risk. These terms can be stigmatizing. These vague terms imply that the condition is inherent to the group rather than the actual causal factors. Use terms and language explaining why and/ or how some groups are more affected. Also, try to use language that explains the effect (i.e., words such as impact and burden are vague and should be explained).	• Vulnerable groups • Marginalized communities • Hard-to-reach communities • Underserved communities • Underprivileged communities • Disadvantaged groups • High-risk groups • At-risk groups • High-burden groups • Disparities • Underrepresented minority • Vulnerable (or disadvantaged)	• Groups that have been economically/ socially marginalized • Groups that have been historically marginalized or made vulnerable; historically marginalized • Groups that are struggling against economic marginalization • Communities that are underserved by/with limited access to (specific service/resource) • Under-resourced communities • Groups experiencing disadvantage because of (reason) • Groups placed at increased risk/put at increased risk of (outcome) • Groups with a higher risk of (outcome) • For scientific publications: Disproportionately affected groups - Groups experiencing disproportionate prevalence/rates of (condition) • Historically and intentionally excluded • Disinvested • Inequities • Historically marginalized, minoritized, or excluded • Oppressed (or made vulnerable or disenfranchised)

Key principles	Instead of this ...	State this ...
Capitalize racial and ethnic identifiers. Capitalizing racial and ethnic identifiers is a critical practice that reflects respect, recognition, and affirmation of individuals' identities. This guideline promotes clarity and equality in language use and underscores the significance of cultural identities.	• black • white • latino/latina • latinx	• Black • White • Latino/Latina • Asian American • Latinx
Use terminology that the members of the community use to describe themselves. Use the language, labels, and identifiers that individuals or groups choose to describe their identity, culture, or experiences. This promotes respect, dignity, and inclusivity. For instance, some people in recovery may prefer to be called "addict," and it's important to honor their choice.	• Indians	• Native peoples • Indigenous peoples • American Indian • Alaska Native
Use person-first language and avoid unintentional blaming. Avoid dehumanizing language by using language that describes people first by using "people" or "person" first when characterizing individuals or groups or describing people with specific conditions. (i.e., personal/group characteristics are secondary and not primary). Be as specific as possible about the group you are referring to. Also consider the context and the audience to determine if language use could lead to negative assumptions, stereotyping, stigmatization, or blame.	• Minority/minorities • Ethnic groups • Racial groups	• People historically marginalized (or minoritized) • BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) • People from (specific racial and ethnic minority group) • People from (specific sexual/gender /linguistic/religious group)
	• The obese or the morbidly obese	• People with obesity; people with severe obesity
	• COVID-19 cases	• Patients or persons with COVID-19
	• The Homeless	• People who are experiencing homelessness

Key principles	Instead of this ...	State this ...
	Cases or subjects (when referring to affected persons)	- People experiencing (disease, health outcome or life circumstance) - Patients
	Disabled person, handicapped	- People with/living with (specific mobility/ cognitive/vision/ hearing disabilities) - People who are experiencing (specific condition or disability type)
	Victims	Survivors
	Inmate, ex-con, felon	- Person with a history of incarceration - Returning citizen
	Illegal Immigrant	Undocumented immigrant
	Slave, master/slave	Enslaved
	Workers who do not use PPE	Workers under-resourced with (specific service/resource)
	People who do not seek healthcare	- People with limited access to (specific service/resource)
Avoid terms with violent connotations (such as target, tackle, combat, etc.) when referring to people, groups, or communities. Language shapes perceptions and attitudes, and using violent or aggressive terms can perpetuate stigma and foster a sense of hostility toward individuals or communities. Use language that promotes respectful and compassionate communication and avoid these terms when communicating about public health activities.	- Target population - Tackle issues within the community - Aimed at communities - Combat (disease); war against (disease)	- Intended audience, population of focus - Consider the needs of/tailor to the needs of the community - In collaboration with the community - Eliminate (issue/disease)

Key principles	Instead of this ...	State this ...
Use asset-based or positively positioned language, not deficit-based language. Deficit-based language focuses on problems, barriers, and challenges experienced by an individual or community. This can lead the audience to assume that the individual or community is the problem rather than the external forces of oppression. In contrast, asset-based language focuses on an individual's strengths and achievements while acknowledging the challenges.	• The communities we serve are strong and powerful. • These students have limited English proficiency. • They are suffering from or with substance use disorder	• The communities we partner with are strong and powerful. • My students are bilingual and emerging English learners. • They are working to recover from substance use disorder or are living with substance use disorder
Avoid labels that may or may not align with how a person identifies. Using labels to describe individuals or groups can be sensitive and complex. It's essential to recognize that not everyone identifies with the same terms, and assumptions can lead to misrepresentation and feelings of exclusion. To avoid label, use language that respects and acknowledges people's identities and experiences and allow everyone to see themselves reflected in a term.	• Sex • He/she • Policeman, fireman, chairman, etc. • You guys • Mother/father	• Sex assigned at birth • They/them • Police officer, firefighter, chair/chairperson, etc. • Everyone, folks, folx • Parent/guardian/other caregivers
Avoid stereotypes and microaggressions. Be cautious in making sweeping statements or assumptions about any social group. It is critical to continue to learn language or perspectives that might offend people, cause harm, or be microaggressions toward equity-deserving groups.	• Handicap parking • On the spectrum, mental disability • What are your preferred pronouns • My concern fell on deaf ears • Turn a blind eye • The latest craze • I'm OCD when it comes to office organization	• Accessible parking • Neurodiverse/non-neurotypical/cognitively diverse • What are your pronouns? • My concerns were not addressed • Ignore • The latest fad • I'm precise when it comes to office organization

Key principles	Instead of this ...	State this ...
Stereotypes can include: • Age • Body Size and Weight • Disability • Neurodiversity • Race, Ethnicity, and Culture • Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity • Socioeconomic Status Microaggressions can include: • Culturally appropriate language • Pejorative language • Violent language • Derogatory terms that stem from the context of mental health, such as schizo, paranoid, psycho, etc.		
Avoid cultural appropriation of language. Cultural appropriation of language occurs when words, phrases, or expressions from a specific culture are used without permission, understanding of their significance, or proper respect. This can be harmful, perpetuating stereotypes, diminishing the cultural context, and offending the community it originates from. To avoid this, it's important to acknowledge the roots of the language used, especially when adopting terms tied to cultural identity or tradition. Moreover, context and cultural relevance should guide when it's appropriate to incorporate such language, ensuring its respectful and authentic use.	• Tribe • Spirit animal • Blacklist/Whitelist • Powwow • White paper, whitelist, white label, blacklist, blackball, blackmail • Black American English/African American Vernacular English terms such as "lit," "thug," "Ghetto," "woke," "bae," "on fleek"	• Community or group • Mentor or role model • Blocklist/Allowlist • Meeting or gathering • Avoid white/black adjectives (e.g., white/blacklist can easily be changed to allow/deny list) • Use standard equivalents

Adapted from: "Health Equity Guiding Principles for Unbiased, Inclusive Communication" (CDC).

Terms

Inclusive language is constantly evolving. We must define a few overarching terms to focus on key terms and principles. Important conversations can derail when people use the same term in different ways or interchangeably. Common language and definitions create a narrative that makes communicating our commitment to racial equity more defined.

Stereotype: A conventional, intuitive, and oversimplified opinion, idea, or belief about a person's community or identity. Stereotypes can perpetuate erroneous and hurtful views of people and communities.

Microaggression: "The brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientations, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group." (Source: Western)

Equity: "Equity" refers to fairness and justice and is distinguished from equality. Whereas equality means providing the same to all, equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and adjust to imbalances. The ongoing process requires us to identify and overcome intentional and unintentional barriers arising from bias or systemic structures. (Source: naceweb.org)

Social Justice: Justice rooted in the idea that all people have access to equal rights, opportunities, and treatment. Examples of social justice are equal pay for equal work, advocating for policies to address racial disparities in healthcare, and fairness in housing and employment.

Social Injustice: Unequal treatment or systemic barriers that result in certain groups being disadvantaged and unable to access opportunities and experience equal rights. Social injustice is often rooted in discrimination and makes it difficult for people to achieve their full potential. Examples of social injustice are the lack of quality education in underprivileged communities, gender inequality, and LGBTQ+ discrimination.

Social Problem: A broader term encompassing any undesirable social condition widely recognized as needing attention and potential solutions. Poverty, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and climate change are examples of social problems. While a social problem can include social injustices, social injustice is a specific type of social problem focusing on unfair power dynamics and unequal treatment. As mentioned above, a lack of affordable housing is a social problem; redlining practices and lending restrictions are widely considered examples of social injustices.

Race-Conscious: An awareness of how race and racial dynamics influence individuals' lived experiences, societal structures, and interactions. It involves recognizing historical and systemic inequalities that impact different racial groups and considering these factors to foster inclusivity and equity. Race-consciousness seeks to understand and address racial disparities without assuming a "colorblind" perspective, which can overlook the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Inclusive Language Checklist

Creating inclusive written materials ensures that all individuals feel represented and respected. Use the following checklist when creating resources or written content:

	Stigmatizing adjectives such as vulnerable, marginalized, and high-risk when are not used when referring to people.
	All racial and ethnic identifiers (e.g., Black, White, Latino, etc.) are capitalized.
	Groups are referred to with the terminology the members of the community would use to describe themselves (e.g., Native peoples, American Indian, etc.).
	Person-first language is used to describe characteristics, behaviors or conditions that people experience (e.g., people with..., people experiencing..., people from..., etc.).
	Terms with violent connotations such as target, tackle, and combat are not used in reference to people, groups, and communities.
	Asset-based language is consistently used to reflect people's strengths versus deficits.
	Inclusive terms are used to describe personal qualities or characteristics so that individuals are not labeled or excluded.
	Language does not reflect stereotypes or microaggressions.
	Words, phrases, or expressions from a specific culture are not used/appropriate without permission, understanding of their significance, or proper respect.

Tools to Check Inclusivity

- [Microsoft Word Inclusivity](#)
- [Whole Whale](#)

Resources to Learn More

- <https://www.csueastbay.edu/universitycommunications/inclusive-language-guide.html>
- <https://guides.18f.gov/content-guide/our-style/inclusive-language/>
- <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/ama-aamc-equity-guide.pdf>
- <https://www.nih.gov/nih-style-guide/race-national-origin>
- <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guide.pdf>
- <https://adaa.org/sites/default/files/ADAA%20Inclusive%20Language%20Guidelines%20May%202022.pdf>
- <https://www.edi.uwo.ca/resources/reports/Inclusive-Language-Guide.pdf>
- <https://www.uab.edu/shp/home/images/Documents/dei/Inclusive-Language-Guide.pdf>
- https://thediversitymovement.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WW-SayThis-whitepaper_201116-F.pdf