Nonprofit Resources, LLC (NPR) Inclusive Language Guide

Version: 1.4

Date: April 17, 2023

Language embodies values and perspectives, some of which are rooted in systems that discriminate against certain groups of people. Over time, specific terms, and ways of using language become established parts of the lexicon, and although their association with discriminatory ideas might no longer be obvious, they continue to be harmful. NPR is committed to starting and sustaining a dialogue about the ways in which we can uncover and understand the harm that language can cause and to developing a common set of guidelines to help us use language inclusively.

Caveat: Although these discussions are deeply important, many of the questions won't be answered with a single solution that is acceptable to everyone. One person's sense of inclusive language can be another person's definition of thin-skinned hypersensitivity. Writers and editors should approach these issues with curiosity and use discretion when choosing words.

Language and cultural norms change, so this guide will be a living document. Please share suggestions, resources, comments, or questions by contacting hr@nonprofitresources.us

Principles

The work of inclusion happens under different labels. NPR has chosen the term "diversity, equity, and inclusion" and the acronym "DEI" for its efforts.

Keep these principles in mind for how you use language.

- **Speak about characteristics only when they are relevant:** If a person's gender or sexual orientation or race or disability isn't germane, leave it out.

- **Understand the implications of person-first language versus identity-first language:** Identity-first language puts the characteristic first, as in "a disabled person," while person-first language would say "a person with a disability." Individuals often prefer one form over the other, and some organizations (such as the National Federation of the Blind) have called for identity-first language for their audience. Whenever possible, ask about and respect choices when people express a preference for a particular articulation. Similarly, people are not their circumstances—don't use terms such as "the

disabled," "the differently abled," "the disadvantaged," "the homeless," or "a transgender" as nouns. Also, racial, and ethnic terms should be used as adjectives, rather than nouns.

- **Understand that bias comes in many dimensions:** An incomplete list includes race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, age, sex, gender, weight/health, wealth/income, politics, parental/family status, religion (including those who are not religious), the nation of origin, immigration status, language/accent, and education level.

- **Be aware that some dimensions of bias are invisible:** People don't always choose to disclose their religion, sexual orientation, cognitive disability, or other aspects of themselves. Don't make assumptions.

- **Recognize and avoid false hierarchies:** Language can telegraph notions of "normalcy" or superiority (e.g., white over non-white, straight over gay/lesbian, abled over disabled, male over female), and these can be subtle. Language rooted in such hierarchies includes master/slave, whitelist/blacklist, and other idioms rooted in "white = good, black = bad." Be aware of and avoid gendered language (e.g., chairman, mankind, manpower, freshmen). Use equivalent language—for example, in contexts where comparing binary gendered groups of people is unavoidable, use "men" and "women" (not "men" and "girls"); be consistent in whether you refer to people by last name (preferred) or first name (don't refer to men by their last names and women by their first names).

Resources

- The [Diversity/Inclusivity Style Guide](#) from California State University covers many of these issues and provides links to related resources.

- The [Bias-Free Language](#) guide from the APA provides broad guidelines and specific examples, organized into categories. The APA has also created guidelines for [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#).

- [A Progressive's Style Guide](#) takes a broad view of inclusive language and features extensive lists of terms to avoid and alternatives to use.

- Brandeis University regularly updates its [Suggested Language List](#), which is organized into several categories.

Dimensions

Discussions about language and usage can be specific to several categories. The discussions that follow focus on those bias dimensions that are most relevant to NPR resources.

Gender/Sex

The term "sex" refers to a person's physiology: male, female, or intersex. "Gender" refers to how a person identifies and can be articulated in many ways, including male, female, nonbinary, agender, pangender, neither, or genderfluid. Gender *identity* can differ from gender *expression* (how a person dresses or otherwise presents in physical terms). "Transgender" refers to people whose gender identity or expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. "Cisgender" refers to people whose gender identity or expression is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

> **Resources**
>
> - Human Rights Campaign provides Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions, as well as an extensive Glossary of Terms.

Use This	Avoid This
intersex	hermaphrodite
assigned [male/female] at birth	born [male/female]
male, female	Male, Female
transgender (adj.)	transgender (n.), transgendered
first-year student(s)	freshman, freshmen
humankind, people (this is gender-neutral language)	mankind, manpower (this is gendered language)
they (singular—either as a person's pronoun or to refer to one individual if their gender isn't known)	he/she, he or she, him or her
pronouns, gender pronouns	preferred pronouns (pronouns are not preferences; they are the words that accurately describe a person)
alum (n., singular), alumni (n., plural), alumni (adjective), graduate (n.)	alumnus, alumna, alumnae
[specific sex and gender]	the other sex, the other gender (language that implies only two options)

LGBTQIA+

The letters in the acronym refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/agender. The acronym includes dimensions of sexual orientation and gender, and the term is used broadly to refer to people in any of these communities.

"Gay" and "queer" are often considered interchangeable, though using "gay" broadly can be seen as disregarding lesbian, bisexual, and other LGBTQIA+ identities. "Queer" is generally more inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people besides gay men, but "queer" was long used derisively, and sometimes still is, so use it carefully. Many members of the LGBTQIA+ community embrace the word "queer" to reclaim it on their own terms.

> **Resources**
>
> ● GLAAD provides a useful [Media Reference Guide](#).

Use This	Avoid This
sexual orientation	sexual preference, lifestyle, sexual choice
straight, heterosexual (as adjectives)	traditional
gay, lesbian, queer (but see note above)	homosexual, alternative

Gendered Language

Nonprofit Resources encourages its employees to use non-gendered language in situations where gender is irrelevant to start and sustain a dialogue about how we can uncover and understand the harm that language can cause create and maintain a more inclusive environment.

Best Practices/Strategies
Several strategies can be applied, when speaking or writing in English, to be more gender-inclusive:

1. Use non-discriminatory language
   When referring to or addressing specific individuals, use forms of address and pronouns that are consistent with their gender identity. Also, avoid gender-biased expressions or expressions that reinforce gender stereotypes.

2. Ensure that gender is visible where it has an important impact on communication

The usage of both the feminine and masculine forms (he or she; her or his) is referred to as "pairing." When the writer wants to explicitly include both women and men in his presentation, this strategy can be used. Two separate words may also be used where gender is highlighted to make the sentence more inclusive.

3. Do not make gender visible if it is not relevant to communication
   a. Use plural pronouns/adjectives (they, them, theirs, and themselves)

   b. Use the pronoun one

Use This	Avoid This
"A staff member in Tennessee earns less than one in California."	"A staff member in Tennessee earns less than he would in California."

   c. Use the relative pronoun who

Use This	Avoid This
"A claimant who is not satisfied with the board's decision can ask for a rehearing."	"If a claimant is not satisfied with the board's decision, she can ask for a rehearing."

   d. Use a plural antecedent

Use This	Avoid This
"New board members must certify that they have familiarized themselves with the record of the proceedings."	"A new board member must certify that she has familiarized herself with the record of the proceedings."

4. Avoid Gender Bias in Writing/Job Descriptions

Use This	Avoid This
People, Humanity	Mankind
Begetting, Creating, Fostering	Fathering
Caring, Nurturing	Mothering
Chair	Chairman, Chairwoman*
All genders	Both genders
Exceptional, Proven	Strong
Proven verbal and nonverbal communication	Feel, Interpersonal

We're looking for **exceptional**… Who are motivated by high goals… Candidates who are go-getters…	We're looking for **strong**… Who thrive in a competitive atmosphere… Candidates who are assertive…
We are a team focused on… Are professional and courteous… Provide great customer service	We are a community of concerned… Have a polite and pleasant style… Nurture and connect with customers

Race/Ethnicity

Talking about race and ethnicity can be especially difficult. The English language includes countless terms that are used explicitly as racial and ethnic slurs, as well as numerous terms that carry derogatory connotations. Complicating matters, some people use "race" and "ethnicity" as synonyms, while others insist, they are distinct.

In its profiles and research, NPR asks about "ethnicity" and offers the following choices (users can choose all that apply):

- American Indian / Native American / Alaskan Native / Indigenous
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Black / African American
- Hispanic / Latinx
- White
- Other

According to a BBC video, "Latino/Latina" refers to geography, and "Hispanic" refers to language. People can be Latino/Latina, Hispanic, or both, depending on where they or their ancestors are from. If you know which term is most appropriate or is preferred by the people being described, use that term, understanding that all are acceptable. Some use the term "Latinx" to avoid the gendered language of "Latino/Latina," and although its use has become common, many find the term offensive or inappropriate. Another term that some prefer is "Latine," but, again, a consensus has yet to emerge.

Similarly, the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) can be polarizing. Some prefer it, while others argue that it reinforces long-standing inequities and creates new ones by highlighting Black and Indigenous people while making no mention of people of other ethnicities. And it is sometimes thought to refer to bisexual people of color. If a broad term is needed, person/people of color (POC) or student(s) of color (SOC) is preferred, but many individuals and groups now use "BIPOC" extensively.

Many terms are used in broad, indistinct ways when specificity would be preferable. For example, the term "Asian" covers an enormous range of ethnicities and cultures from a vast geographical area, and although the term isn't generally considered offensive, its imprecision can be problematic. "Indigenous" is a broad term that can refer to native people from anywhere (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc.). Again, more precision is better, such as "Native American" or "members of the Cherokee Nation" or "Alaska Native." Although some Native Americans identify as "Indians" or "American Indians," the term "Indian" is generally considered inappropriate. "African American" and "Black" are not synonymous. An individual might identify as Afro-Latino or Afro-Caribbean, for instance, or Haitian American or Jamaican American. If race/ethnicity is warranted in a description and you can ask, find out how people prefer to be identified. In all situations, be as specific as possible.

Various terms are used to refer to a person's status or position in social contexts, terms such as "minority," "minoritized," "marginalized," "underrepresented," "underserved," and "nontraditional." These terms are the subject of an ongoing and energetic debate and should be used carefully, understanding that specificity is beneficial—instead of referring to "minorities" or "minoritized students," identify the specific group being discussed and the fact or finding (e.g., underrepresented in STEM disciplines). Many also consider the term "at risk" to be inappropriate.

Terms that relate to race/ethnicity should be used as adjectives, not as nouns—for example, say "Black students and faculty" rather than "Blacks on campus."

Resources

- See the APA's Racial and Ethnic Identity page for guidance.

- The Council of Science Editors provides a web page on Inclusive Language: Race and Ethnicity.

Use This	Avoid This
Black people, White people	black people, white people (caps for Black and White), Blacks, White (don't use as nouns)
African American	African American
legacy, preexisting	grandfathered (note that the term is problematic primarily because of race)
Latino(s), Latina(s)	Latinx
students from diverse backgrounds	diverse students
person/people of color (POC), student(s) of	non-White

color (SOC) (these are preferred, but BIPOC is acceptable)	
multiracial, multiethnic	mixed, mixed race
Asian (but see notes above about specificity)	Oriental
cheat	gyp
Minority Serving Institution (MSI)	
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)	
Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)	
Tribal Colleges	

Ability/Disability

Although the term "disability" denotes a lack of some ability, don't frame discussions in those terms. Don't speak about people being *confined* to a wheelchair or *suffering* from blindness. People aren't *victims* of a disease or disability. Don't "heroize" people with disabilities or say they are successful *despite* a disability. Don't use terms such as "normal" or "healthy" to describe people without disabilities.

Avoid calling disabilities "conditions" or characterizing them as problems. They are the facts of people's lives and are different from what other people experience, but they don't make anyone more or less of a person. See difference for what it is—dissimilarity—and nothing more. Remember that many disabilities—cognitive and physical—are invisible.

Resources

- The ADA National Network provides a clear set of guidelines for writing about people with disabilities.

- The National Center on Disability and Journalism has created an extensive style guide covering terminology and usage.

Use This	Avoid This
living with (a disability or diagnosis)	suffering from
person/people without disabilities	able bodied
person/people with disability/disabilities	the disabled (n.), differently abled

uses a wheelchair, is a wheelchair user	wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair
has a disability	is handicapped
blind, legally blind, low vision	visually impaired
Deaf (the community), deaf (audiological status), partial hearing loss, hard of hearing	hearing impaired
has a learning disability	dumb, slow learner
a problematic webinar, a malware-infected system	lame, crippled, cripple (v.) (to describe objects or activities)

Socioeconomics

Bias can creep into discussions surrounding socioeconomics because income is sometimes characterized as being a function of ability or initiative. Be aware of subtle cues that hint at false connections. Avoid framing discussions in terms of privilege; focus instead on differences and implications.

> **Resources**
>
> ● The DC Fiscal Policy Institute has developed a [Style Guide for Inclusive Language](#) that provides useful guidance in this area.

Use This	Avoid This
low-income, people experiencing poverty	poor, impoverished
people/person experiencing homelessness	homeless (n.)
emerging economy (when possible, name the country)	third-world country, developing country

Ageism

Ageism ascribes certain qualities—positive or negative—to people based on their age. Although age discrimination is often seen as something that affects older individuals, ageism can harm a person of any age by making assumptions about that person's abilities, attitudes, preferences, or experiences.

Use This	Avoid This
Gen X, Gen Y / Millennial, Gen Z (but see [this article](#) for an argument against using "generation" labels at all)	[digital native](#)
legacy, preexisting	grandfathered (note that the term is problematic because of age but primarily [because of race](#))
older, experienced, people over [age]	elderly, senior citizen, senior (n.), of a certain age
youth, young person, teen/teenager/preteen	immature, childish

IT Terminology

Some terminology that has been incorporated into IT labels and tools has discriminatory and offensive roots. For example, the term "penetration test" has sexual undertones, and the use of "male" and "female" to refer to cable connectors can be similarly offensive. If such terms must be used, be aware of the sensitivity.

Members of the community have identified other words as terms to avoid when possible, including "white paper," "webmaster," "scrum master," and "master service agreement," understanding that alternative terms—such as "topic paper" or "main service agreement"—are not always direct synonyms.

ISAC) has released a guide for [Using Inclusive Language in IT](#).

- A [blog post](#) from Localization Lab explains why some tech terms are offensive.

Use This	Avoid This
allow, allowlist, safe senders list, disallow, disallowlist, denylist, blocklist	whitelist, blacklist
primary/secondary, main/subordinate	master/slave
perimeter network	demilitarized zone (DMZ)
placeholder value	dummy value
ethical hacking, security assessment test (but in some cases the meaning of "penetration test" requires that term)	penetration test
plug, socket/jack	male, female (when referring to cable connectors)

Appendix: Revision History

Date	Revision	Description
02/17/2022	1.4	Added notes about the use of "Latine" and several IT-related terms that can be offensive; added a copyright line and assigned a Creative Commons license.
01/12/2022	1.3	Shortened the title; clarified the guidance about person-first language; added links to other resources (APA, REN-ISAC, Localization Lab); added "graduate" as term to use; clarified that "grandfathered" is based on race, not age; added "Asian" (use) and "oriental" (avoid); added "differently abled" as a term to avoid; added "gyp" as a term to avoid; removed "hard of hearing" as a term to avoid; added "allowlist," "disallowlist," and "denylist" (use); added "penetration test" and the use of "male" and "female" to refer to cable connectors as terms to avoid.
10/22/2021	1.2	Added a note in the Principles section that NPR uses "DEI"; added a link to an article that encourages not using "generation" labels.
8/26/2021	1.1	Added sentence in intro about hypersensitivity; clarified gender-neutral

		versus gendered language; added comment that pronouns are not preferences; added "multiracial" and "multiethnic" as words to use and "mixed" and "mixed race" as terms to avoid; added MSI; added note that people are not "victims"; added "people experiencing poverty" and "emerging economy"
8/18/2021	1.0	First full draft of guide