INCLUSIVE WRITING PRACTICES

What is Inclusive Writing?

Language is constantly-evolving, and as the rights of different groups of people – especially those who have been historically marginalized – have grown over time, so must the language we use to discuss them. Using specific, current language that is preferred by the groups and individuals you are writing about is an important feature of respectful, thoughtful, and accurate writing. This handout includes some best practices for inclusive writing and additional resources you should consult for up-to-date information on preferred language.

Best Practices

Only note race, ethnicity, social class, disability, and other identity markers when relevant: If aspects of an individual's identity are not relevant details to your arguments or analysis, omit them, as they can be distracting and reductive. Avoid the term "minority" if possible. This term can imply inferiority, and it is often inaccurate and vague. Instead, use the adjective forms of "minoritized" and "marginalized" alongside specific context through adjectives and descriptors, such as "religiously minoritized groups in America."

Be specific with the terms you use to describe individuals and groups: Determine which identity markers are relevant and important to acknowledge, and be specific in your terminology. Do not use "umbrella terms" or catch-all descriptors, as they may include people you are not intending to describe and cause your audience to make overgeneralizations about the relevancy of your writing. For example, using the phrase "low income" when discussing socioeconomic groups can lead readers to apply your discussion to a larger or smaller group than you intended. More specific grouping, such as "below the US federal poverty level" or "making at or less than minimum wage," provides clear parameters for your readers.

Use the terms preferred by the people you are writing about: Using the labels and terminology preferred by the individuals and communities you write about demonstrates respect. You can ask individuals or groups for the terms they would use to describe themselves, or use the guides below to determine the most specific and relevant terms. In general, using neutral nouns such as "people", "adults", or "individuals" in combination with adjectives or descriptive phrases is preferred, such as "bisexual people" and "Chinese American adults."

Avoid terms that imply inferiority or victimization: Writers can unintentionally create bias when comparing groups, so carefully consider what language you use to differentiate one group from another. If we consider one group as "standard" or "normal," that inherently implies that the other group is nonstandard or abnormal, stigmatizing them. To avoid this, use parallel phrasing for groups, such as "people" or "participants," with different adjectives to delineate the groups. Additionally, be aware of terms that imply victimhood, as that belittles and marginalizes those you are writing about. These are often a reflection of bias, so avoid terms like "afflicted", "restricted", "stricken", "suffering", and "unfortunate" unless specifically requested or relevant.

Be aware of insensitive slang: A number of terms that are culturally significant or derogatory have entered the general lexicon as slang. Carefully consider where the phrases you use come from, and if you are unsure of the origins of a phrase, take a moment to look them up. Many of these insensitive terms are related to historical discrimination, especially that of Indigenous Americans and differently-abled individuals, and they may not be immediately recognizable to you as offensive.

Using Outdated/Problematic Sources

Older source material or research may contain language that is outdated or harmful to the people it describes. While you should avoid perpetuating an author's biases or using derogatory language in your own writing, it is important that we not erase, dismiss, or misrepresent the prejudices of the past. This is especially applicable to intentionally harmful, derogatory, or violent language.

When analyzing sources that use outdated or derogatory language:

- Paraphrase the needed information and explain that the source material uses harmful language
- If necessary, quote the source material but use an asterisk, footnote, or endnote to discuss the author's language and context within both the source and your own writing.
- If unsure of how to incorporate an outdated source into your writing, or if it is the best fit, consult your professor.

Additional Resources

Inclusive language and unbiased language changes often depending on the experiences and perspectives of the people being described, as well as on how populations change over time. While we have provided a number of general guidelines, the specifics of terminology, phrasing, and inclusivity across the spectrum of race, gender, ability, nationality, and more aspects of identity are too complex to cover in a handout. Below are guides from organizations that have the time, experience, and resources to keep them current. We recommend that you revisit them regularly, and we also welcome suggestions to revise our own handout to keep it up to date.

General Guides on Inclusive Writing
APA's Bias-Free Language Guide
APA's General Principles for Reducing Bias
APA's Inclusive Language Guide
The Diversity Style Guide
The CDC's Preferred Terms for Select Population Groups & Communities
San José State University Writing Center Guide to Inclusive Writing in MLA

Writing about Race and Ethnicity
APA's Guide on Racial and Ethnic Identity in Writing
The National Association of Black Journalists Style Guide
San José State University Writing Center Guide to Antiracist Writing

Writing about Disability/Ability
The ADA National Network Guidelines for Writing about People with Disabilities
APA's Guide on Disability in Writing
San José State University Writing Center Guide to Offensive Language around Mental Illness

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Writing about Socioeconomic Status
APA Style Guide on Socioeconomic Status
National Union of Journalists' Guide to Reporting on Poverty
The University of Bristol's Writing Guide on Socioeconomic Status

Writing about Gender and Sexuality
The Hamilton College Writing Center's Guide to Writing about Gender and Sexuality
APA Style Guide on Gender
APA Style Guide on Sexuality

Writing about Nationality and Citizenship
Northwestern's Editorial Guide to Writing about National Identity and Religion
The University of Bristol's Writing Guide on Nationality

Writing about Religion
Northwestern's Editorial Guide to Writing about National Identity and Religion
The University of Bristol's Writing Guide on Religion