

Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Communicating in the Engineering Sciences

Inclusive and Bias-Free Language

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The Power of Language

- Words expose values.
- Words shape perception.
- Some everyday words and expressions perpetuate ethnic, gender, or other stereotypes.
- If there are no words for a group, then it does not exist, leading some people to feel invisible.

Stop and Think

- What is a stereotype?
- What is the golden rule and how does it apply to our language use?
- List some common expressions that reveal and shape how we see people. For example, we often hear the collocation (words that through repeated use go together) “fat and lazy”. This has the effect of casting all fat people as lazy.

Bias-Free Language

Bias-free language:

- addresses people with inclusivity and respect
- avoids perpetuating prejudicial beliefs or demeaning attitudes

(APA 2019a)

Bias-Free Language

Bias-free language is sensitive to :

- age
- disability
- gender
- racial and ethnic identity
- sexual orientation
- socioeconomic status
- **intersectionality** (the cumulative way in which multiple forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism, combine to produce and sustain complex inequities)

(APA 2019a)

Bias-Free Language

Some general guidelines:

- How communities are referred to changes.
- When in doubt, draw on an authoritative source.

E.g.in referring to someone from the disabled community an authoritative source is United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA).

Person-first and Identity-first Language

- Use terms that honour and explain person-first or identity-first perspectives.
- The individual's preference supersedes style.
 - person-first language: the person is emphasized, not the disability or chronic condition.
 - identity-first language: the disability becomes the focus, allowing individuals to choose their identity.

(APA 2019a)

Person-first Language

Table 1: Some Person-first terms (APA 2019b)

Term to avoid	Suggested alternative
mentally ill	person living with a mental health condition person with a mental disorder person with a mental illness
addict	person with a substance use disorder
homeless person	person without housing
slave	person who is/was enslaved
special needs physically challenged mentally challenged mentally retarded handi-capable	person with a disability people with intellectual disabilities child with a congenital disability

Identity-first Language

Table 2: Some Identity-first terms (APA 2019b)

Term to avoid	Suggested alternative
person with deafness	deaf person
person who is deaf	hard-of-hearing person
person who is hearing impaired	deaf-blind person
person with hearing loss	Comment: Most Deaf or Deaf-blind individuals culturally prefer to be called Deaf or Deaf-blind (capitalized) rather than "hearing-impaired," "people with hearing loss," and so forth.
person with deafness and blindness	
person with blindness	blind person
	visually impaired person
	vision-impaired person

Gender and Sexual Orientation Language

Gender: the socially constructed ideas about behaviour, actions, and roles of a particular sex.

Gender-exclusive language: lump all people under masculine language or within the gender binary (man or woman). When describing a generic or hypothetical person whose gender is irrelevant to the context, do not use gendered pronouns such as *he* and *she* or gendered pronoun combinations such as *he or she* because these assume gender; instead, use the singular *they* because it is gender inclusive.

Gender identity: a component of gender that describes a person's psychological sense of their gender. Many people describe gender identity as a deeply felt sense of being male; or female; or nonbinary that may not correspond to a person's sex assigned at birth, or primary or secondary sex characteristics.

(APA 2019b)

Gender and Sexual Orientation Language

Do not use the generic *man* or *mankind* to refer to people; use humanity.

Do not assume that people with perceived prestigious roles or professions are male or identify as male. The chairman of a board can identify as female. There are male, female, and non-binary engineers, doctors, etc.

Gender and Sexual Orientation Language

Table 3: Some Preferred Terms for Gender and Sexual Orientation (APA 2019b)

Term to avoid	Suggested alternative
birth sex natal sex	assigned sex sex assigned at birth
hermaphrodite tranny transvestite transsexual (unless being used medically)	LGBTQ+, LBGTQIA+, etc. transgender people trans and gender nonbinary folks or folx genderqueer queer (Consider your audience when using the term queer , not everyone receives this word positively; many members of the LGBTQIA+ community have now reclaimed it)

Race and Ethnic Identity Language

Race: the social construction and categorization of people based on perceived shared physical traits that result in the maintenance of a sociopolitical hierarchy

Racial Identity: an individual's sense of being defined, in part, by membership in a particular racial group. **Culture** can be interchangeably with **racial** and **ethnic identity** as these are the psychosocial manifestations of race and ethnicity.

Racial Privilege : unearned power that is afforded to people groups based on status rather than earned merit; such power may come in the form of rights, benefits, social comforts, opportunities, or the ability to define what is normative or valued.

(APA 2019b)

Race and Identity Language

Table 4: Some Preferred Terms for Race and Identity)

Term to avoid	Suggested alternative
tribe red indian	When writing about Indigenous Peoples (note the capital), use the names that they call themselves.
minority coloured people	people of colour communities of colour
Trinidadian Negro Coolie	Citizen of Trinidad and Tobago Trinidadian or Tobagonian when referencing the island of birth is necessary to the context Afro-Trinidadian; Afro-Tobagonian Indo-Trinidadian

Socio-Economic Status Language

classism: the assignment worth and ability based on actual or perceived social class; can be expressed via prejudiced attitudes, language, or behaviours directed toward individuals based on perceived or actual social class.

class privilege: encompasses the unearned advantages, protections, immunities, and access experienced by a small class of people who typically carry special status or power within a society or culture

socioeconomic status (SES): encompasses not only income but also educational attainment, occupational prestige, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class.

(APA 2019b)

Socio-Economic Status Language

Table 5: Some Preferred Terms for Socio-Economic Status (APA 2019b)

Term to avoid	Suggested alternative
the poor	people whose incomes are below the national poverty threshold
low-class people	people whose incomes are below the national average
poor people	underserved communities

Further Reading

American Psychological Association.2019. Inclusive Language Guidelines. Available at:

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

References

American Psychological Association.2019a. Bias-Free Language. Available at:
<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language>

American Psychological Association.2019b. Inclusive Language Guidelines. Available at:
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