Writers should be objective and avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes. By writing objectively, writers gain respect and trust from readers, stimulate curiosity, and lessen feelings of alienation. This handout will...

General Strategies

We recommend the use of inclusive language at the recommendation of several disciplines as well as the American Psychological Association (APA). The APA places importance on reducing bias because it is essential to not imply judgements or assumptions (inadvertently or not) about a group of people by using certain language choices to identify or describe them. For more information on the APA's specific guidelines regarding reducing bias, please refer to sections 3.11-3.17 of the APA Publication Manual or visit www.apastyle.org.

Value Individuals

The majority of advice in this handout is based on the idea that all individuals matter, along with their identities and perceptions of their own experiences. While this perspective may be taken for granted by some, it is not (nor has it been) a universally held belief. Many conflicts over inclusive language stem from this philosophical divide.

One way to value individuals in your writing is by using language that acknowledges the person before their difference or disability. For example, instead of calling someone “homeless,” you would refer to them as “a person experiencing homelessness.” This is called person-first language.

Use the Terms that the Group or Individual Prefers

As a general rule, call people what they want to be called. In other words, use the terms that a group or individual prefers, keeping in mind that these terms may be different than the terms they use to refer to themselves internally. If you are uncertain of what to call a group or individual, ask! You can also look to authorities on specific groups for guidance, such as Autism Speaks for people with autism and GLAAD for the LGBT community.

Avoid Stereotypes

Stereotypes are notions about a certain group of people which are widespread. Stereotypes can be about everything from food preferences to intelligence. While some stereotypes may be true, often they are false and biased, and thus, can be offensive.

Use Labels Only When Labels Are Relevant

Make sure that you have a reason for calling attention to some aspect of a person’s identity. You should
only include details about a person when it is necessary to do so.

**Example:** I saw an Asian woman on the bus.

**Note:** Why mention that the passenger is Asian or that she’s a woman?

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**Be Specific**

When using language to describe a person or a group of people, it is best to be as specific as possible. Being specific allows the reader to know who you are talking about with clarity and certainty. It also helps to minimize stereotypes and prejudices by more exactly describing a person/people and not assigning them to a generalized category.

**Non-specific:** The patient is Native American.

**Specific:** The patient is Navajo.

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### Sex & Gender

Writing about sex and gender can be confusing. Use the following terms and their accompanying explanations as a guide:

#### Sex Assigned at Birth

People are “assigned” a sex at birth for legal purposes (i.e., for their birth certificate). This assignation is based on the appearance of the person’s genitals: those with penises are assigned male, those with vaginas are assigned female, and those with ambiguous genitals are assigned intersex. Some people now consider the term “intersex” offensive, and there is movement toward the term “disorders of sexual development.” This term is less stigmatizing and also more medically accurate.

#### Gender Identity

Whereas sex assigned at birth is a classification made externally (usually by a doctor), your gender identity is how you self-identify. Though many social and legal institutions reinforce a gender binary of male and female, actual gender identities defy simple either/or classification. Throughout history, people have identified as male, female, both, neither, or another gender entirely.

**Cisgender** individuals identify with their sex assigned at birth.

**Transgender** individuals do not identify with their sex assigned at birth.

**Trans Men (FTM)** were identified female at birth but identify and portray their gender as male. In general, when writing about a person who was identified as female at birth but who identifies as male, use male pronouns and nouns (e.g., he, his, him, man, etc.).

**Trans Women (MTF)** were identified male at birth but identify and portray their gender as female. In general, when writing about a person who was identified as male at birth but who identifies as female, use female pronouns and nouns (e.g., she, hers, her, woman, etc.).

#### Gender Expression

Your gender expression is everything you do to realize your gender identity. This includes the types of clothes you wear, the way you walk and talk, the language that you use, etc.

**Gender expression is culturally contingent:** For example, there is nothing inherently masculine or feminine
about a particular hairstyle, but it might be seen as one or the other within a specific culture.

**Androgyny** is a form of gender expression that may contain or blend aspects of both masculine and feminine gender expression. Androgyny can also be used to describe a gender identity that has both male and female elements.

**Pronouns**

For centuries, writers used masculine terms (i.e., “he,” “him,” “his,” etc.) to refer to all human beings.

**Universal “He”:** Since the dawn of time, man has tried to fulfill his basic needs.

This practice is now generally seen as biased and exclusive. There are several strategies for being more inclusive about sex and gender when writing about people:

The first solution is to use “he or she” instead of “he.” However, this solution is often wordy and awkward. More importantly, using “he or she” still excludes those who do not identify with the male-female binary.

“He or she”: When a student is given an assignment, he or she should record it in his or her calendar.

The second solution is better: use plurals. Since plural nouns take the gender-neutral pronoun “they,” you will avoid the pronoun binary problem.

*Singular (“he or she”):* If a student has a suggestion, he or she should submit it via email.

*Plural (“they”):* If students have suggestions, they should submit them via email.

Third, you can also use “they” as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun. However, be aware that most style guides (including the APA Manual) disagree about whether or not this is “correct”—even though “they” has been used as a singular pronoun since the times of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

*Singular “They”:* If a student loses their notes, they should contact their classmates.

Finally, you can use other gender-neutral pronouns. These pronouns have been proposed as a way to provide English with a non-gendered option. However, since many of these pronouns were developed recently, many people are unfamiliar with them. To complicate matters, there are several sets of these pronouns (e.g., “per,” “thon,” “xe,” “ze,” etc.). Only use these gender-neutral pronouns if your audience is familiar with and uses them.

*“She” (For comparison):* I gave my cat to her, and she gave me her dog.

*“Ne”:* I gave my cat to nem, and ne gave me nir dog.

*“Ze”:* I gave my cat to zir, and ze gave me zir dog.

*“Ve”:* I gave my cat to ver, and ve gave me vir dog.

**Biased Terms**

Regardless of pronouns, you should use inclusive terms for people and professions. Many words contain the word “man,” which can be replaced with “person” or some other term. These words are biased because they assume that only a man can perform these roles.
| Non-biased Terms for Professions |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| **Biased**                    | **Non-biased**   |
| Chairman                      | Chair, Chairperson |
| Fireman                       | Firefighter      |
| Freshman                      | First-year Student |

**Non-biased Terms for Professions**

**Sexual Orientation**

Sexual orientation is different than gender expression. Use “sexual orientation” rather than “sexual preference” to describe an individual’s sexuality.

**Acceptable Terms**

**LGBT or LGBTQIA:** These are accepted umbrella acronyms for sexual minorities. The letters stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Trans, Queer (or Questioning), Intersex, and Asexual.

**Gay:** A man who is primarily or exclusively attracted to and/or has emotional or sexual relationships with other men. The word “gay” is also often used to describe any individual who is attracted to the same gender.

**Lesbian:** A woman who is primarily or exclusively attracted to and/or has emotional or sexual relationships with other women.

**Bisexual:** A person who is attracted to both men and women.

**Asexual:** A person who does not experience sexual attraction.

**Pansexual:** A person who is attracted to people regardless of their sex or gender.

**Ally:** A person who is not LGBTQIA but listens to and learns about the community and helps to promote respect and equality.

**Insider and Unacceptable Terms**

Even though many people who are LGBTQIA will use certain terms to describe themselves or others in their community, these terms are often not appropriate to use as an “outsider”—especially in a formal written setting.

**Insider terms:** dyke, butch, faggot, campy, tranny

There are also terms which are considered unacceptable in both inside and outside settings, usually because of historical connotations.

**Unacceptable terms:** hermaphrodite, transvestite, transsexual

It is always best to consider your audience, or if writing about a specific person, to ask which terms they prefer.
Race and Ethnicity

Race
The concept of race has evolved drastically over the centuries. Its definition varies from place to place and has historically carried undertones of power and privilege. The term “black,” for example, was designated to enslaved peoples by slaveholders, and the term “white” was initially restricted to individuals of Anglo-Saxon heritage.

Race is presently conceptualized as a social construct—albeit one with real-life impacts.

Ethnicity
Ethnicity is a type of classification based upon an individual’s heritage—for example, a person’s nationality. References to ethnicity should always be capitalized, as they are proper nouns.

Some ethnic groups have masculine and feminine phrasing such as Latino/Latina, Filipino/Filipina, etc.

Often, race and ethnicity are conflated, but it’s important to remember that they are two separate classifications. For example, a person can be both white and Latina.

Preferred Terms for Specific Groups
Many of the terms surrounding racial and ethnic identity are tied to a history of conflict and oppression. As a rule, use the terms that a group prefers—and keep in mind that these terms may be different than those that the group uses internally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Terms for Specific Racial or Ethnic Groups</th>
<th>Offensive, Out-dated, or Problematic Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>black or African American</td>
<td>colored, dark, Negro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biracial or multiracial</td>
<td>mulatto or mixed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ability
As stated above, it is best to describe people using person-first language. This means using language that focuses on the person instead of on the condition/disability.

Incorrect: the diabetic student, the depressed woman
Correct: the student who has diabetes, the woman with depression

The words “handicapped,” “disabled,” and “impaired” should only be used if those words have actual meaning in context.

Incorrect: The handicapped student could not enter the building because there was no ramp.
Correct: The student’s entry was handicapped by lack of ramps.

Often, euphemisms or trendy politically-correct terms are considered offensive by the community they describe. It is better instead to use simple language.

Incorrect: challenged, differently-able, special, handi-capable, special needs
Correct: the girl with Down Syndrome

Some terms are considered offensive because of historical connotations, inappropriate use, or overuse.

Examples: crippled, barren, dumb, lame

In addition, some words or terms are considered offensive because they victimize the person they describe.

Examples: confined to a wheelchair, afflicted with schizophrenia, victim of multiple sclerosis, suffers from depression

Some terms are appropriate to use only in a clinical setting. Because they can be considered offensive due to extensive inappropriate use, they should not be used outside this setting.

Examples: neurotic, psychotic, retarded

Finally, some terms are widely accepted by some audiences but considered offensive to many others. It is best to consider your audience in these instances.

Examples: emotional disorder, mental illness, neuroatypical, neurodivergent

Special rules apply to people who have autism and people who are deaf. Because these people and communities sometimes see the autism or deafness as part of their identity or community, it can be acceptable in certain instances to use “deaf person” or “autistic person” instead of using “the person who is deaf” or “the person with autism.” When describing the culture or community, it may also be appropriate to capitalize as well (e.g., Deaf or Autistic). Certain audiences may prefer or dislike using the phrase “on the autism spectrum,” so it is best to consider your audience.

References


