Inclusive Language Quick Reference Guide

What is "inclusive language"?

Inclusive language refers to the practice of consciously choosing language that promotes the inclusion of communities that have been historically marginalized. Underpinning this practice is an understanding that language has and continues to be constructed in a society in which some groups are afforded undue power and privilege and, consciously or unconsciously, leverage that power through language to form and perpetuate harmful biases. Left unchecked, these biases contribute to a language of exclusion that obfuscates meaning and promotes "othering" of certain groups. Opting for inclusive language means choosing language that aims to correct for or acknowledge these biases.

About this document

This document is a quick introduction to inclusive language principles and provides guidance on how to put these principles into practice. It begins with the ABCs of inclusive language—an easy-to-remember list of what to keep in mind when using inclusive language. Next are five questions to help you determine which terms are most appropriate to describe a specific group or population. The final section presents an example from a published SRI report of how to revise writing to be more inclusive.

Most content in this document is based on the American Psychological Association's Inclusive Language Guidelines. We recommend consulting those guidelines if you need more detail.

The ABCs of inclusive language

A — Avoid deficit language

Think about the connotation, not just the denotation, of words.

✓ Use "person without a high school diploma"

⊖ Instead of "high school dropout"

Don't portray mutable characteristics as innate.

✓ Use "eligible for free or reduced-price meals"

⊖ Instead of "impoverished" or "poor"
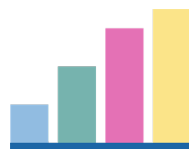
Assume that people are not the problem.

✓ Use "underserved students"

⊖ Instead of "underperforming students"

B — Be specific and transparent

Define terms that may be unclear and explain the tradeoffs that were considered in choosing terminology.

Describe how study subjects were identified as members of identity groups.

Think about who will use your findings and what they need to know to apply them correctly.

C — Center on the human

When deciding between person-first or identity-first language, honor the terms selected by members of an identity group.

Use "students with disabilities" instead of "disabled students"

Use "Deaf student" instead of "student with deafness"

When talking about human outcomes, refer to people instead of institutions.

Use "district leaders prioritize parent engagement" instead of "the district prioritizes parent engagement"

Question your word choices

When deciding what terms to use to describe a certain identity group, consider the following questions:

1. Does the term minimize bias? If a term implies a deficit or perpetuates a stereotype, then it promotes bias. To minimize bias, choose terms that are as neutral as possible and avoid blaming or casting a negative light on the person or identity group. For example, instead of describing a group of students as "high-need" or "low-performing," consider terms that point to barriers these students face, such as "underserved," or terms that do not have a normative tone, such as "students with test scores below the state standards." Also consider whether terms for comparison groups imply a deficit in the group of interest. For example, if you describe one group of students as "high-achievers," does that mean all of the other students are "low-achievers"?

Biased terms	Less biased terms
disadvantaged, underprivileged	historically underserved
regular/typical students	students without an Individualized Education Plan
limited English-proficient student	emergent bilingual student
man, mankind	people, humanity, human beings, humankind

2. Is this the term used by members of this group? Understanding a group's preference is especially important in determining whether to use person-first or identity-first language. Some groups prefer to have their humanity acknowledged through person-first language before being described as a member of an identity group, whereas other groups use identity-first language to demonstrate pride in their cultural identity. It is important to note that sometimes preferred terms do not follow other inclusive language principles, and sometimes preferred terms may not be appropriate for use by those outside of the group. Because language is constantly evolving, regularly check for updates on a group's preferred terms by consulting websites that represent an identity group or referring to APA guidelines.

Terms chosen by nonmembers of a group	Terms chosen by members of a group
special ed, special needs students	students with disabilities
socioeconomically disadvantaged students	students facing socioeconomic barriers
student who is deaf	Deaf student
transman, transwoman, transgendered	trans, transgender student

3. What term is most common? Using the terms most commonly used in the field makes it easier for others to understand your research and connect it to a wider literature. You can find which terms are recommended by APA, used by professional communities, or codified in legislation. However, a commonly used term may contain bias. In that case, consider whether a new term that minimizes bias will be better, even if it is less familiar. If you stick with the common term, be sure to include a footnote that acknowledges the bias in the term and indicates you are using it so that your audience can easily recognize it. If you choose a less familiar term, be sure to explain how the term relates to or differs from the more common term and justify your preference.

More commonly used terms	Less biased terms
he or she, he/she, him/her, him or her	they, their, them
English learners, English language learners	multilingual learners

4. Does the term clearly point to the construct being discussed? Defining terms is always good practice, but a good term will intuitively make sense to a reader without a definition. Consider the target audience of your writing. Will it be easy for that audience to connect the term directly to its intended meaning?

Less clear terms	Clearer terms
minority students	students of color, Black and Brown students
at-risk	off-track to graduate in 4 years

5. What term does your audience expect? Consider whether your audience is accustomed to seeing a particular term in policy documents and whether that term is inclusive. If it is not inclusive, consider which alternatives would be acceptable or add a footnote explaining the reason for using the term and identify its more inclusive alternatives.

Biased terms codified in policy documents	More inclusive alternatives
needy families	families with low incomes
disadvantaged	underserved

Sample revisions

Less inclusive

The percentage of special needs preschoolers who received special education services in a regular early childhood program varied greatly by disability type, with as few as 18% of preschoolers with deaf-blindness compared to 48% of preschoolers with an emotional disturbance.

More inclusive

The percentage of preschoolers with individualized education plans (IEPs) who received special education services in an integrated early childhood program varied greatly by disability type, with as few as 18% of Deaf-Blind preschoolers compared to 48% of preschoolers diagnosed with an "emotional disturbance" according to IDEA Sec. 300.8 (c) (4).

Switch to person-first language, be more specific, and remove outdated terms.

The term "regular" suggests that other classes are "irregular." Further, it does not precisely identify the classes you intend to discuss, leaving the reader to interpret which classes are "regular," which may vary by their personal experience. Consider "integrated" to more respectfully and precisely describe a classroom that integrates preschoolers with and without disabilities into the same class.

The Deaf-Blind community prefers identity-first language and capitalization of the words "Deaf" and "Blind."

On its own, the word "disturbance" carries negative connotations. However, this is the language used in the IDEA legislation, so it is hard to avoid. We can clarify our use of a less-than-inclusive term by setting the term off with quotation marks and citing the source of the term.

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