

A Guide to Bias-Free Communications

A Reference for Preparing Official University Publications

People in the university community are increasingly aware of the need to use language that recognizes our diversity and does not offend, demean or exclude people on the basis of gender, race, ethnic group, religion, age, ability/disability or sexual orientation.

In the fall of 1990 the Faculty Senate endorsed the Gender Equity Task Force recommendation to assist faculty, staff and students in dealing with these issues when preparing official university publications and other communications. A broad-based group of professionals from the university community developed this guide in consultation with a number of faculty, staff and students.

Changing our language usage, however, does not come easily or automatically. Familiar ways of writing and speaking are more comfortable; substitute phrases do not always spring quickly to mind.

This guide is meant to help you find a more encompassing word or phrase when you need it and to be more attuned to language that, whether intended or not, may offend others. This guide aims primarily at written material but applies as well to the spoken word.

This area is controversial and in flux. Usage that groups prefer today may change next year, and this guide will be updated annually. The point is to try to communicate in a way that is respectful of diversity. Also, examples we cite may not satisfy everyone. For those who want more specific information or other alternatives, we have included a bibliography.

We welcome your comments, questions, and suggestions on how to make this guide more useful and pertinent.

For more information, please call the Office of University Publications, 262-0948.

Gender

1. Include all people in general references by substituting gender-neutral words and phrases for gender-biased words.

Example mankind	Recommended people, humanity, human beings
man-to-man defense	one-to-one defense
man the operation	staff the operation
manpower	labor, human resources
layman's terms	ordinary terms
man hours	staff hours, hours
manmade	manufactured, synthetic, artificial

2. Communicate to everyone by including both male and female reference points. (Don't assume marital or familial relationships.)

Example faculty and wives	Recommended faculty and guests faculty and spouses
You and your spouse are invited...	You and your guest are invited...
boyfriends/girlfriends	friends, guests, partners
Dear Sir	Dear Sir or Madam Dear Madam or Sir Dear Colleague Greetings

3. Avoid gender-biased pronouns by:

a) Dropping pronouns that signify gender and restructuring the statement.

Example Each student should hand in his term paper by...	Recommended Each student should hand in a term paper by...
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b) Changing to plural construction.

Example Each student should hand in his term paper by... A nurse cares for her patients...	Recommended Students should hand in term papers by... Nurses care for their patients...
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c) Replacing masculine or feminine pronouns with "one" or "you."

Example Each student should hand in his term paper by...	Recommended You should hand in your term paper by...
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Gender (cont.)

d) Avoid awkward construction such as he(she), s/he, (s)he, or him/her. Such constructions, which can be easily reworked, imply that women are considered to be the subject only as an afterthought.

Example

As a professor emeritus, s/he is entitled to a reduced parking fee in Lot 60.

When welcoming a new teaching assistant, ask him/her to provide a permanent address.

4. Use a parallelism to refer to women and men equally and to make references consistent.

Example

Danny Jones, a strong athlete, and Suzy Favor, and attractive young runner, are...

10 men students & 16 female students

Prof. Brown and Julia Smith were recently promoted.....

5. If a direct quote (derived from research or an interview) offends or inappropriately excludes women or men and is not essential to your document, consider eliminating, paraphrasing or replacing the quote.

Age

1. Refer to a person's age only when it is relevant to the medium or the message. For example, communications that follow newspaper style are generally expected to state a subject's age. However, in most internal university communications age is not pertinent and its mention may even be distracting.

Irrelevant

The researchers, ages 56 and 60, won a grant from NIH.

2. If you use a generic age descriptor, ask your subjects what wording they prefer. Do they refer to themselves as older persons or senior citizens? As youths, teenagers, or young people?

3. Avoid clichés such as “precocious,” “spry,” or “chipper,” and avoid generalizations that reinforce stereotypes about age. Middle school children are not necessarily troublemakers, and not everyone over 80 lives in a nursing home.

6. Use neutral words for “man” and “woman” in job titles or descriptions.

Example

chairman
policemen
sales girl
spokesman
lady lawyer
Founding Fathers

Recommended

chair, chairperson, director
police officers
sales clerk
spokesperson
lawyer
Founders

7. Base communication on relevant qualities, not on sex. Avoid sexual stereotyping.

Example

She's a good basketball player. She shoots like a man.

A brilliant female researcher...

Recommended

She's a good basketball player. She shoots well.

A brilliant researcher...

8. When choosing photographs or illustrations, consider the balance of women and men. Also, be conscious of the relative positions of women and men and their actions. Nonverbal messages conveyed by portraying men standing/women sitting, men gesturing at smiling women, men pointing to or working with lab and other equipment while women passively observe imply status differences. Such implications, whether subtle or direct, are unrealistic in the modern workplace or university. Work with artists and photographers to update graphic content.

4. Don't assume older people are less intellectually, physically, or emotionally able than other age groups. Also, don't underestimate the capabilities of younger people simply on the basis of their age.

Inappropriate

Carl Elliot, 12 feeds his dog every day without having to be reminded.

Darleen Hampton, 62, still puts in a full day in the admissions office.

5. Don't use patronizing language.

Example

The sweet little old lady beamed as she entered the classroom.

Recommended

The older woman smiled as she entered the classroom.

6. In communications meant to represent a range of experiences or viewpoints, include people of diverse ages.

7. Newspaper style dictates that females 18 years or older are women, not girls; males 18 years or older are men, not boys. In a university setting, however, it may be more appropriate to refer to all students, whether 17 or 60, as men and women.

Race and Ethnicity

1. Avoid identifying people by race or ethnic group unless it is relevant. We don't usually point out that an individual is white or of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The same rule should apply to other groups.

Inappropriate

Andrew Young, the black mayor of Atlanta, cast his vote.

Maria Duran, a Hispanic professor of Physics, has been promoted to associate professor.

Alpha Beta Gamma, the black fraternity, wants to re-roof its building.

Recommended

Andrew Young, the mayor of Atlanta, cast his vote.

Maria Duran, a professor of physics, has been promoted to associate professor.

The Alpha Beta Gamma fraternity wants to re-roof its building.

2. Avoid the term "non-white," which sets up white culture as the standard by which all other cultures should be judged. Also avoid "culturally disadvantaged" and "culturally deprived." These terms imply that the dominant culture is superior to other cultures or that other groups lack a culture.

3. Refer to individuals as "members of a minority group" or specify the minority group (e.g., Latino) when minority group identity is pertinent. ("Minority" refers to a group and serves as a modifier in the term "minority group.")

Example

Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

Minorities attend the meeting.

Preferred

Women and members of minority groups are encouraged to apply.

Members of the Hmong and Korean communities attended the meeting.

4. Avoid words, images or situations that reinforce stereotypes and that imply all people of a particular race or ethnic group are the same.

Example

Not surprisingly, the Asian-American students did best in the math contest.

The Problem

Assuming it is relevant to point out that this group excelled, the phrase "not surprisingly" may reinforce the stereotype that all Asian Americans have superior aptitude in math.

5. Be sure your communications do not patronize or give token attention to members of racial or ethnic groups. Exaggerated focus on people's accomplishments or

insincere and gratuitous references to their concerns imply that they are not normally successful or accomplished, or are not considered to be in the mainstream of society.

6. Stay attuned to the current terminology by which racial and ethnic groups refer to themselves. Usage changes (e.g., from "Negro" to "African American"; from "Oriental" to "Asian American"). National newspapers and television news are good indicators of current usage. Also, ask people what term they prefer.

People who trace their ancestry through the Caribbean or Central and South America may identify themselves as coming from any one of a number of different cultures and ethnic groups. For instance, the terms Hispanic, Latino/a, Chicano/a, and Puertorriqueño/a all have different meanings. Many people whom the U.S. Census would describe as "Hispanic" prefer the term "Latino or Latina." Some people with Spanish-sounding surnames may have indigenous Indian, German or Asian ancestry or prefer to be referred to by their nationality; e.g., Colombian, Nicaraguan, guatemalan. Others may prefer that no reference be made to their nationality or ancestry.

People whose ancestors originally populated North America may want to be identified with specific communities, such as Winnebago or Chippewa, or they may prefer to be referred to as "American Indian" or "Native American" rather than "Indian." If in doubt, ask.

Also, attention must be paid to the punctuation used in referring to racial and ethnic groups. The terms "African American," "Asian American," etc., are nouns and should not be hyphenated. However, when these terms are used as modifiers (e.g., "the Asian-American students" in the example under number 4), they should be hyphenated.

7. Be sensitive to religion when referring to various ethnic groups. Don't make assumptions. For instance, just as not all Arabs are Muslims, most nationalities and ethnicities will embody different religious practices. Avoid stereotyping a race, nationality or ethnic group with a specific religion.

8. Review written communications and visual materials to ensure that, *where appropriate*, all groups—women, men, minority and ethnic group members, older people and disabled people—are not represented.

This does not mean that every publication, video or similar material must include all groups at all times, or that participation or particular groups should be exaggerated or overstated. But generic campus publications, such as college bulletins or communications that are part of a continuing series (such as newspapers or annual reports), should aim for *reasonable* representation of all groups involved.

Disabilities

1. The terms *impairment*, *disability*, and *handicap* are **not** synonymous. Be sensitive to the meaning of each.

An **impairment** is a physiological condition.

Arthritis is an impairment in which tissues of the joints are damaged.

A **disability** is the consequence of an impairment. A disability may or may not be handicapping.

Disabilities resulting from arthritis include difficulty in bending the spine or limbs, and thus difficulty in walking or performing tasks.

A **handicap** is the social implication of a disability; a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment or oneself. The term should not be used to describe a disability.

People with arthritic knees and hips may be handicapped by the absence of elevators in older buildings.

2. Disabilities may be the result of either injury or disease — often a disease long past. Disabled people should not automatically be viewed as sick or having a disease.

3. Put people first, not their disabilities.

Example

The visually impaired student used a special keyboard.

Preferred

The student, who is visually impaired, used a special keyboard.

Sexual Orientation

1. “Gender orientation” and “sexual orientation” are preferred to “sexual preference,” a term which implies that being homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual is a matter of choice, and that sex is the focus of the relationship.

2. Most gay people prefer the term “gay” to the somewhat clinical “homosexual.” The term “gay” may be used to refer to both men and women, but “lesbian” is the term preferred by gay women. Keep in mind that people of a bisexual orientation may not consider themselves to be part of either the gay or heterosexual community.

As a matter of principle, refer to societal groups in the way that members of each group prefer. Ask people what term they prefer.

3. Avoid using “gay lifestyle” or “lesbian lifestyle.” Being gay or lesbian is not a lifestyle; it is a fundamental orientation. In addition, gays’ lives and relationships are as diverse as those of the rest of the population.

4. Do not focus on a disability unless it is relevant to your communication.

Irrelevant

The new instructor, whose bout with polio left him on crutches, will teach two sections of African History.

Relevant

The author of the text on legal rights for the disabled writes from experience. She has been a paraplegic since childhood.

5. In photos or illustrations, depict disabled people in everyday situations — work, home, play — and show them interacting with nondisabled people. Do not focus on wheelchairs, crutches, or other adaptive equipment.

6. When the context calls for discussion of people with and without disabilities, use that term — “people without disabilities” — rather than “normal” or “able-bodied.” (“Normal” implies that by comparison disabled people are abnormal; “able-bodied” suggests that all disabled people are physically disabled or unable to compensate for their disabilities.) “Nondisabled” is another useful term.

7. Avoid language that portrays people with disabilities as either unfortunate, helpless victims, or, at the other extreme, as courageous superhumans.

4. “Gay community [is] an umbrella term used in the same manner that phrases such as ‘the Italian American community’ are used to describe groups with similar, but not identical backgrounds and social agendas. The term may be used to refer to both men and women, but, again, ‘lesbian and gay community’ is preferred.” (*Media Guide to the Lesbian and Gay Community*, 1990, p. 37)

5. Include the viewpoint of somebody who is gay when reporting on a gay topic. Better yet, solicit more than one gay viewpoint, since the gay, lesbian and bisexual community is not monolithic.

6. Avoid classroom or extracurricular activities or exercises that assume all students are heterosexual or that otherwise invade students’ privacy.

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