

Inclusive Language

1. What is inclusive language?

Inclusive language is language that is free from words, phrases or tones that reflect prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups. It is also language that doesn't deliberately or inadvertently exclude people from being seen as part of a group.

Inclusive language is sometimes called *non-discriminatory language*. Stereotyping means presuming a range of things about people based on one or two of their personal characteristics such as their appearance, apparent intelligence, personality or character, or their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, location, socioeconomic status or disability. Stereotypes are usually used in a negative way and are often evidence of prejudice against others. ***Even when a remark or action based on a stereotype is not based on a conscious prejudice it can still be hurtful and cause harm or damage to the person.***

Discriminating against a person or group of people means treating people less favorably than others or doing something that has a less favorable effect on someone because of their personal characteristics.

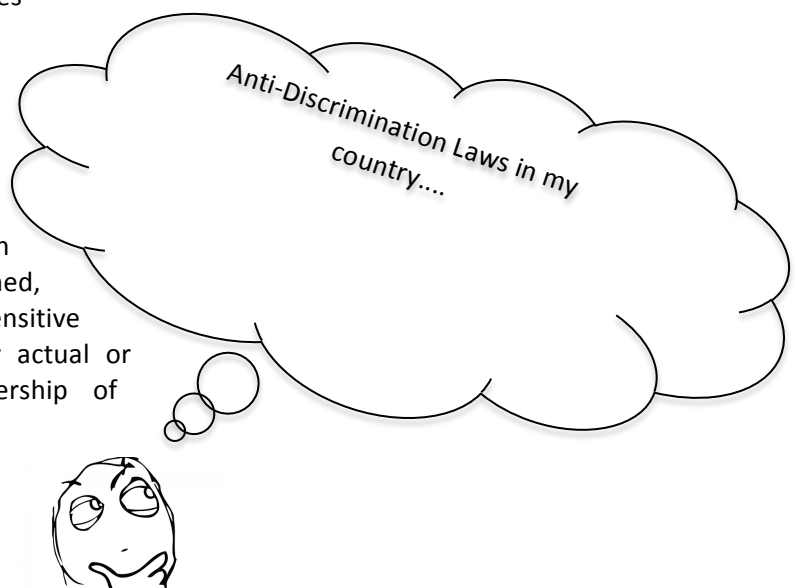
2. Why is inclusive language important?

Language is our main form of communication and it plays a powerful role both in contributing to and in eliminating discrimination. ***Language that is exclusive is harmful because it can inhibit or prevent grantees reaching their full potential and benefitting from their educational experiences.*** People can be hurt, demeaned and offended by discriminatory language.

Even 'positive stereotyping' (for example suggesting that a particular race, gender or age group are gifted in a particular area) can be damaging as this oversimplifies individual characteristics and ignores the diversity within groups and society more broadly. The use of inclusive language is an important way to reflect the diverse nature of a given society.

Non-discriminatory language avoids false assumptions about people and helps to promote respectful relationships. A commitment to inclusive language is an important attribute of a modern, diverse and inclusive society. *Inclusive language enables everyone to feel that they are being reflected in what is being said.* The goal of developing inclusive societies is often embodied in a number of international, national and state laws relating to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination.

As a result it is in many countries unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of a wide range of characteristics including race, color, national or ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability, be it physical, sensory, intellectual or psychiatric. There is no place in written or spoken communication for uninformed, prejudiced, stereotypical or insensitive references to people based on their actual or perceived characteristics or membership of particular groups.



There is no place in public discourse, legally or ethically, for insensitive, inaccurate or derogatory language stereotypes that are based on factors such as ability / disability, age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race or cultural background.

Used with care and sensitivity, language can play a powerful role in minimizing conflict and building connections between individuals and groups. In this way, it can play an important part in building a society in which all people are valued and feel included.

3. Inclusive Language and the Fulbright Program

The Fulbright Program through its key values of promoting mutual understanding and forging peaceful relations is committed to providing equal opportunity and access for all people. Inclusive language can play an important role in acknowledging everyone and treating all people equitably and with the sensitivity and respect to which they are entitled.

The EFDI therefore recommends that Fulbright commission staff, grantees, and affiliated stakeholders should strive to use inclusive language. Discriminatory language is damaging to others in work and learning environments. From a professional point of view it is important that inclusive language is used in all forms of communication as a means of **showing courtesy and respect for every individual**. Communication is less effective if inaccurate, irrelevant or exclusive language is used.

4. What are some examples of inclusive language?

Inclusive language is important in all areas where individuals and groups may be referred to on the basis of certain characteristics. When referring to individuals, characteristics such as the person's gender, sexual orientation, religion, racial group or physical characteristics should only be mentioned where this information is relevant to the discussion. **Any group characteristics should always be applied with care and consideration, with an awareness of the diversity of the audience, and always be couched in inclusive terms.**

Historically and in common practice, there are some particular areas where individuals and groups have been marginalized or have experienced discrimination. In particular, people have experienced discrimination because of their culture, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, socioeconomic status, personal appearance and where they live.



The following sections briefly consider each of these key areas in terms of language inclusivity and includes practical examples of language usage for each that is more inclusive.

In using inclusive language, it is useful to keep the following generic questions in mind:

1. Is it necessary to refer to personal characteristics such as sex, religion, racial group, disability or age at all?
2. Are the references to group characteristics couched in inclusive terms?
3. Do the references to people reflect the diversity of the intended audience?
4. Is the use of jargon and acronyms excluding people who may not have specialized knowledge of a particular subject?

Finally, inclusive language does not mean cumbersome, dull or vague language; it simply means language that has been carefully constructed in ways that treat all people with respect and impartiality.

5. Culture, race and ethnicity

Ethnic and racial labels, names and expressions can be created and used to portray certain groups as inferior or superior to others. Sometimes this usage is unintentional and stems from the continued dominance of mainstream culture; other times it is deliberately used to marginalize, demean and discriminate. Whichever is the case, there are many ways to make language usage more inclusive with respect to culture, race and ethnicity.

Some of the key ways to be more inclusive with regards to race, ethnicity and culture include:

- avoiding undue emphasis on racial and ethnic 'differences,' e.g., only refer to the ethnic or racial background of a person or group if it is relevant to the discussion;
- avoiding stereotyping, e.g., making positive or negative generalizations about members of a particular racial, ethnic or national group in ways that detract from people's fundamental humanity and individuality;
- avoiding the promotion of 'racial or ethnic invisibility,' e.g., the use of umbrella terms such as 'Asians' that ignores multiple ethnicities within Asia. Instead, refer to people from Indonesia, Thailand, etc;
- avoiding the use of expressions that ignore the history, achievements and continuing cultures of marginalized and minoritized groups
- avoiding the use of derogatory labeling, offensive humor and ethnic and racial slurs, e.g. the use of terms whose main function is to set aside some groups from an implied mainstream by stressing their eccentricity or undesirability, or by attempting to be divisive through language by suggesting a 'them and us' mentality.
- avoiding 'positive'/patronizing comments based on stereotypes, such as 'You speak such good English!'
- using terms that are inclusive such as 'first name' and 'family name' or 'former name,' rather than 'Christian name' and 'surname' or 'maiden name.'
- avoiding referring to people by their migration status, such as 'former refugee,' 'asylum seeker,' etc., unless it is relevant in the specific context

Sometimes, the use of generic terms and expressions will be preferable. For example, use of the term 'American,' 'German,' 'Norwegian,' or 'Dutch,' can be highly inclusive, provided it is intended to include all communities and individuals within these countries, irrespective of the person's background or country of birth, and not used in ways that exclude people with a migration background or indigenous populations.

- If it is important to specify the descent or ethnicity of a person or group a number of strategies can be adopted to maximize inclusivity of language:
- Use a qualifier in conjunction with the noun American, e.g., 'Vietnamese-born American,' 'Iraqi-Arabic-speaking Dutch,' 'Jewish Bulgarian,' etc.
- Use phrases that refer to a person or group's background or origin, e.g., 'American of Irish background', 'German of Turkish descent', etc.
- It should be noted that some individuals prefer not to be identified through origin or descent at all. This preference should be respected.

Notes and Comments

6. Gender

Historically in the English-speaking world, language usage has privileged men and often rendered women invisible or inferior. This has happened through:

- the dominance of male-related terms
- the unequal treatment of men and women
- the stereotyping of gender roles
- unnecessary or irrelevant references to personal characteristics based on gender.

In language terms, the most inclusive strategy is to avoid references to a person's gender except where it is pertinent to the discussion. This often involves seeking gender neutrality when using terms and pronouns. English provides many options for ensuring that language usage is both unambiguous and inclusive.

These options include:

- avoiding patronizing expressions, e.g. use 'the commission staff' or 'the office staff' rather than expressions that assign a particular gender to an entire team.
- using alternatives for 'man' where the term is generic but ambiguous and could refer to either human beings or male human beings, and in practice usually works to exclude women, e.g.:
 - ✓ 'humankind' or 'people' instead of 'mankind'
 - ✓ 'workforce' instead of 'manpower'
 - ✓ 'staffing the office' instead of 'manning the office'
 - ✓ 'chair of the committee' instead of 'chairman of the committee'
- using alternatives for 'he' and 'his' as generic pronouns, including changing word order and using plural forms, e.g.
- instead of 'The grantee will receive his grant payment...' use 'Grantees will receive their grant payments...'
- using terms which include all relationships, e.g. 'partner' or 'spouse' instead of 'husband' and 'wife'
- understanding and respecting a woman's preference to be referred to using the title 'Ms' on the basis that it does not identify her by her marital status
- understanding and respecting a person's preference to be referred to using the title 'Mx' on the basis that it does not identify them by their gender
- mixing up the word order in common expressions, e.g. instead of 'him and her' try 'her and him.'

Notes and Comments

7. Sexual orientation and gender identity

Language that discriminates against people on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity is unacceptable. The enduring bias in society against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people makes many people feel invisible, marginalized and inferior to other people. This bias means that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people often experience direct and/or indirect discrimination through the language of others.

Words and phrases that are likely to offend, that are negative or derogatory uses of terms identified with particular characteristics, or that are hurtful should always be avoided.

- Ensure the language you use to refer to people's sexual orientation is accurate and appropriate. **Acceptable terms are gay, lesbian, and bisexual.** Terms such as fag, dyke, queer, and tranny are sometimes used by people within these groups as a means of claiming their identity, but can be seen as derogatory when used by people outside the group. For example, lesbian women may refer to themselves as dykes, but do not appreciate heterosexual women or men using the term.
- **Transgender and intersex are related to a person's gender identity.** In both instances, the biological gender (sex) and the socio-cultural gender do not conform 100%. When sex and gender are identical, we speak of 'cis-gender' identity. When sex and gender do not correlate, we speak of 'trans-gender' identity. When a person's sex does not fit the binary body model, we speak of intersex. The gender assigned to an intersex person at birth may or may not correspond with their gender expression. Apart from 'male' and 'female,' individuals may express themselves as 'non-binary,' 'gender-fluid,' or 'non-conforming.'

Key points to remember:

- avoid creating invisibility. LGBTI people are often rendered invisible in conversation, in public discourse and cultural and media representation. Across all media, heterosexual orientation tends to be represented as 'better,' more morally correct, or as the only 'normal' and 'healthy' sexual orientation. *Language that reinforces the assumption that all intimate personal relationships are heterosexual denies the reality of same-sex relationships.* One way to avoid reinforcing this invisibility is to use 'partner' instead of gendered terms such as 'wife,' 'husband,' 'boyfriend,' or 'girlfriend' (which, in addition, assign a specific gender identity to a person) if you do not know the sexual orientation of the people to whom you are speaking. The exception is when you are aware that a same-sex partner is legally married. In this case, it is appropriate to refer to them as 'husband' or 'wife,' unless they express a preference for 'partner' or 'spouse.'
- avoid stereotyping LGBTI people. Placing limitations or expectations on individuals because they belong to a certain group is damaging, hurtful and discriminatory. *Challenging homophobic jokes and derogatory comments by speaking up and naming them as such goes some way toward creating an environment inclusive of diverse sexualities and gender identities.*
- avoid expressions that disparage or trivialize the diverse sexual experiences and desires of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people. Derogatory and patronizing expressions such as 'That's so gay' or 'All she/he needs is to find the right man/woman' are unacceptable. People who use these phrases should be called out on their words and be made aware of the emotional damage they can do to others.
- also avoid stereotyping that could be considered 'positive' but still places unfair expectations and limits on others, for example, 'gay people are generally more creative and open-minded.'

Notes and Comments

8. Disability

The linguistic portrayal of people based on ability or disability has traditionally highlighted disability and led to terms including 'handicapped,' 'the blind,' and 'the disabled.' **This language trend has tended to emphasize the disability rather than the person.** This leads to derogatory labeling, depersonalization or impersonal reference, stereotyping (often with people with a disability seen as victims or suffering), the crude amalgamation of whole spectrums of quite specific physical and intellectual impairments, and many other forms of social and economic discrimination.

The general principle to apply with regard to improving language inclusivity regarding disability is to focus on the person, not the disability. Hence, phrases such as 'person with a disability' or 'musician with vision impairment' are considered more inclusive and sensitive.

However, as with all forms of language inclusiveness, avoid unnecessary or gratuitous reference to the disability at all if it is not pertinent to the discussion. You can also practice inclusivity by de-centering able-bodiedness as the norm and speak of 'disabled and non-disabled' rather than 'able-bodied and disabled.'



The portrayal of people with disability has been fraught with contradictions because of negative attitudes towards disability. People with disability are often and inappropriately seen as helpless, to be pitied and to be cared for rather than as equal and contributing members of society.

Where people may be uncomfortable, uninformed or embarrassed about disability, many euphemisms have been created to describe disability and people with disability, render them invisible, or inferior to a perceived 'norm.'

Referring to people with disability requires knowing the correct terms to use and how to avoid terms that might be inadvertently insulting to the individual or that might stereotype them to others. **Always refer to people first.** Phrase references to those with disability by stating the person first and the reference to the disability second. For example, a child with a diagnosis of autism should be referred to as a 'child with autism' or a 'child who has autism' rather than an 'autistic child' or a 'child who is autistic.' The term 'child with autism' indicates that there is more to the child than simply the diagnosis of autism. Similarly, a student may have a learning disability but they are not a 'learning disabled' student.

In summary, increased language inclusivity with regard to disability can be developed easily by applying as many of the following principles as practical:

- Avoid any unnecessary reference to disability.
- Be aware that not all disabilities are visible and that there are gray zones between disability and able-bodiedness. Don't assume that something is not there just because you cannot see it..
- Avoid terms which equate the person with the ability or disability, e.g. 'an epileptic'
- Use terms that recognize that the disability is only one characteristic of the person or group
- Use precise and accepted terms (where possible, ask the individual).
- Avoid using euphemisms, however commonly they may be already in use (for example 'challenged,' 'specially-abled').
- Avoid terminology that implies victimhood or suffering as part of any illness, disease, disability or impairment
- Avoid derogatory terms that stem from the context of intellectual impairments or mental health, for example, 'retarded,' 'dim,' 'imbecile,' 'mental,' 'schizo,' or 'psycho.' It is not appropriate to describe a conflicting approach to an issue as 'schizophrenic' as this shows a misunderstanding of what schizophrenia is and underplays the impact of this mental illness.
- Avoid being effusive about the achievements of people with disability when they are going about daily activities; it is patronizing to see or speak of a person with disability as heroic or amazing because they have a job, do their job well, or simply get up in the morning to do their job. Saying things like, "I admire you; if I were in your situation, I wouldn't know how to cope," reinforces the notion that disability is a tragedy and that life with a disability is sad, hard, and joyless.
- Try to use the word 'accessible' for spaces and objects designed for people with disabilities, as in 'accessible parking space,' 'accessible rooms,' 'accessible elevators,' 'accessible bathrooms,' etc.
- Avoid the use of the term 'special' when referring to people with disabilities. They don't have 'special needs,' they are not 'special,' they don't require 'special care.' Segregation of people with disabilities historically (and sometimes still) occurred under the banner of 'special.' Try to use the term 'individual' instead, as we all have 'individual needs,' whether we are disabled or not.

9. Socioeconomic status and location

Another way that discrimination can occur through language is in relation to perceived or actual economic status (usually poverty) and, linked to this, geolocation (usually rural or suburban). Socioeconomic status is a characterization derived from a combination of education, income and occupation, and can seriously impact student well-being and academic performance. People from low socio-economic status backgrounds may experience a range of social and economic disadvantages, such as low-quality living environments, unemployment or underemployment of family members, limited access to technological resources, poor health and discrimination.

Students from a low socio-economic status background (often first-generation college students) can experience difficult transitions to college, and when these students self-identify in 'lower,' working-class strata, they can feel out of place and court intentions of dropping out. Such students may have a more limited repertoire of learning strategies available to them, and may approach studying differently than students from an academic background. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are often obliged to work while studying in order to survive.

Additionally, students from different socio-economic status backgrounds have been shown to have achievement gaps in standardized testing due to stereotype threat, a phenomenon when members of a stigmatized group perform poorly on a task because they fear confirming a negative stereotype that is associated with their ingroup. Unfortunately, socioeconomic diversity may be difficult for instructors to detect in their classes, as students may strive to appear middle-class in order to self-normalize.



People are often assigned particular characteristics (almost always negatively) on the basis of factors such as where they live: sometimes even their postcode, how they speak, their cultural preferences, perceived levels of income and access to financial resources, and their physical appearance. People are typically unfairly and inaccurately judged against some perceived but rarely defined norm. Also it is inappropriate to interpret a particular accent as an indicator of intellectual capacity.

With regard to economic circumstances and geolocation, language usage that is inclusive

- only refers to location and relative economic circumstances where this is relevant to the discussion;
- avoids negative terms relating to location or status
- does not make value judgments based on irrelevant characteristics; and
- treats all people, regardless of their perceived or actual economic circumstances or where they live, with respect, fairness and dignity.

Notes and Comments