



Guidelines for Inclusive Language



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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 favourably than others or doing something that has a less favourable 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 students 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 Australian 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 embodied in a number of international, national and state laws relating to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination¹. As a result it is generally unlawful to

¹ Discrimination is prohibited under law by:

- *Anti-Discrimination Act 1998* (Tasmania)
- *State Service Act 2000* (Tasmania)
- *Age Discrimination Act 2004* (Commonwealth)
- *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Commonwealth)
- *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Commonwealth)

discriminate on the grounds of a wide range of characteristics including race, colour, 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.

3. Inclusive language and the Department of Education

The Department of Education, through its key values of equity, respect and relationships, 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.

Employees and students are encouraged to be aware of their responsibility 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 diversity. 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 marginalised 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 audience²?

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- *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Commonwealth)
 - *Fair Work Act 2009* (Commonwealth)

² Be careful not to presume the audience doesn't include people with particular characteristics just because you can't see them. People may have hidden characteristics or be closely associated or related to people with a range of characteristics and be offended or upset by inappropriate language about people with those characteristics.

4. Is the use of jargon and acronyms excluding people who may not have specialised 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

Australia is a racially and culturally diverse nation but a history of colonisation and immigration has made English the dominant language and Anglo-Celtic culture mainstream. However, rich, diverse and long-standing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) cultures that predate European colonisation by over a thousand generations, along with changing and diverse patterns of migration – from countries and cultures where English is not the first language – mean that language inclusiveness with respect to culture, race and ethnicity is important.

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 marginalise, 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', eg, only refer to the ethnic or racial background of a person or group if it is relevant to the discussion;
- avoiding stereotyping, eg, making positive or negative generalisations 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', eg, 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 Aboriginal people in Australia, eg, 'Australia was first settled in 1788';
- avoiding the use of derogatory labelling, offensive humour and ethnic and racial slurs, eg, 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. The use of terms like 'ethnics' or 'ethnic Australians' can imply a distinction that is divisive whereas 'ethnic and racial groups' is a more straightforward and descriptive usage.
- avoiding 'positive'/patronising comments based on stereotypes, such as, 'You speak such good English!'
- using terms that are inclusive such as 'first name' and 'family name', rather than 'Christian name' and 'surname';
- avoiding referring to people by their migration status, such as 'former refugee', 'humanitarian entrant' or 'former humanitarian entrant', 'new arrival', etc.

Sometimes, the use of generic terms and expressions is ideal. For example, use of the term 'Australian' can be highly inclusive, provided it is intended to include all communities and individuals

within Australia, irrespective of the person's background or country of birth, and not used in ways that exclude Indigenous or immigrant people.

If it is important to specify the descent or ethnicity of a person or group a number of strategies can be adopted to maximise inclusivity of language:

- Use a qualifier in conjunction with the noun Australian, eg, 'Vietnamese-born Australian', 'Iraqi-Arabic-speaking Australian', 'Jewish Australians', etc.
- Use phrases that refer to a person or group's background or origin, eg, 'Australian of Irish background', 'Australians of Chilean descent', etc.

It should be noted that some Australians prefer not to be identified through origin or descent at all. This preference should be respected.

With regard to languages, it is best to try to avoid the various acronyms used to describe people whose home language is not Standard Australian English, such as NESB (Non-English Speaking Background) and ESL (English as a Second Language). These privilege English as a reference point and suggest that any language that is not English is limiting.

The recent adoption of the acronym EAL (English as an Additional Language) reflects a trend towards language that is more inclusive and respectful of Australians' rich linguistic heritages.

6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The most accurate and inclusive collective term for Indigenous Australians is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Other widely accepted group terms include Aboriginal people(s), Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

The words 'Indigenous', 'Aborigines' and 'Aboriginal(s)' are always capitalised when referring to Australian Aboriginal people and should never be abbreviated.

In addition to this, many Aboriginal groups identify and refer to themselves using local terms derived from their own languages; for example Palawa (for Tasmanian Aboriginal people) or Koori (in parts of south eastern Australia); within these, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples identify with more localised language groups and regional areas. In order to achieve language inclusiveness and respect for both groups and individuals, such terms – however localised or idiomatic – should be identified and used. There is no substitute for simply asking the people concerned and respecting their wishes.

The linguistic portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within Australia continues to be often negative and stereotypical. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are often described in racial group terms, for example as 'blacks', 'natives' or 'Aborigines', often in ways that imply 'primitiveness', and rarely as individuals with personal names. Education can play a powerful role in addressing this language usage.

Similarly terms that emphasise only part of this definition, eg 'of Aboriginal descent', 'has Aboriginal heritage', 'of Aboriginal background', do not relate to the full reality of what it is to be Aboriginal and must not be used. Terms that distinguish between Aboriginal people in terms of 'racial purity', eg, 'full-blood Aborigines', 'half-caste', 'part-Aboriginal', are often used to serve discriminatory purposes, do not reflect the reality of being Aboriginal or treat people as less than whole, and must be avoided.

Similarly, terms that are used to denigrate or diminish the validity of Aboriginal languages or cultures – for example, referring to languages as pidgin or to spiritual and cultural belief systems as 'myths' or 'legends' – must be avoided. It also must be recognised that attempts to conceptualise Aboriginal cultural practices using English words, eg, 'dreamtime stories', often have negative connotations and

can be used out of context, so due care should be exercised. This is, however, an important observation for all cultural groups where English words may be unable to convey the full meaning of cultural practices and beliefs.

Terms that have historical connotations and resonances such as assimilation, integration, mission, and boy, missy, miss and girl when referring to adults should be avoided.

The separate linguistic and cultural identities of the Indigenous people of the Torres Strait Islands must be recognised. The preferred term is Torres Strait Islander. Abbreviations such as 'Islander' and 'ATSI' or 'TSI' should not be used.

Wherever possible an Aboriginal person or group's *preference* of title should be used. If in doubt, apply the general guiding principle of sensitive and inclusive communication: ask the person or group.

For further advice, contact [The Office of Aboriginal Affairs](#) ☎(03) 6233 3671 or email oa@dpac.tas.gov.au.

7. 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 patronising expressions, eg, instead of 'the girls in the office' use 'the women in the office' or, if the term is being used to collectively describe the administrative staff, 'the office staff'.
- 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, eg:
 - Instead of 'mankind' try 'people' or 'humanity'
 - Instead of 'manpower' try 'workforce'
 - Instead of 'manning the office' or 'manning the stall' try 'staffing the office' or 'staffing the stall';
 - Instead of 'sportsmanlike' try 'fair' or 'sporting'
- Using alternatives for 'he' and 'his' as generic pronouns, including changing word order, eg, instead of 'The employee may exercise his right to a review' try 'Employees may exercise their right to a review'

- Avoiding the term 'Chairman' when referring to the generic role of the person chairing a meeting, use 'Chair' instead
- Using generic terms to avoid personifying inanimate objects as male or female, eg, instead of 'She's a fine ship' try 'It's a fine ship'
- Using terms which include all relationships, eg, instead of 'wife' or 'husband' try 'partner'
- 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
- Showing consistency and care with respect to use of titles, modes of address, occupational terms and role descriptions, eg:
 - Instead of 'the paintings of Margaret Preston and Heysen' try 'the paintings of Margaret Preston and Hans Heysen'
 - Instead of 'actress' or 'waitress' try 'actor' or 'waiter'
- Mixing up the word order in common expressions, eg, instead of 'him and her' try 'her and him'.

8. 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, marginalised 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.

Key points to remember

- Ensure the language you use to refer to people's sexual orientation is accurate and appropriate. Acceptable terms are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Terms such as fag, dyke, queer, poofa 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.
- 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 sexual orientation. Language that reinforces the assumption that all personal relationships are heterosexual denies the reality of same-sex relationships. One way to avoid reinforcing this invisibility is to use 'partner' instead of 'husband' or 'wife', and 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' if you do not know the sexual orientation or marital status of the people about whom or to whom you are speaking. The exception is when you are aware that a same-sex partner is legally married. In this situation it is respectful to refer to them as married.
- 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 sexual diversity.

- Avoid expressions that disparage or trivialise the diverse sexual experiences and desires of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people, for example, 'That's so gay' or 'All she/he needs is to find the right man/woman'.
- Also avoid stereotyping that could be considered 'positive' but still places unfair expectation and limits on others, for example, 'gay people are generally more creative and open-minded'.
- The phrase 'that's so gay' is commonly used to refer to something which is defective or unacceptable. This phrase is hurtful and harmful to LGBTI people and should be discouraged. Those who say their use of the term is not a reflection on gay people should be made aware of the damage their words can do to others.

9. Age

Inclusive language should be sensitive to the entire age range. This is particularly important given Australia's aging population, education's particular focus on children and young people and the implications for how people of all ages are talked about.

Terms such as 'older' and 'younger' are relative and should be used with clarity and in context. Terms such as 'older people', 'youth' and 'young people' are largely neutral in their connotation. Terms that have become institutionalised over a significant amount of time – such as 'retirees' and 'senior citizens' – are relatively safe.

Equally important to the usage of inclusive terminology in relation to age, is avoiding any stereotyping or connotation that a particular age group is more or less able, or has stereotypical characteristics by virtue of chronological age alone. Avoid using expressions such as 'a young and vibrant team' or 'a mature workforce'. Instead, try 'an effective and vibrant team' or 'an experienced workforce'.

10. 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 emphasise the disability rather than the person. This leads to derogatory labelling, depersonalisation 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 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.

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
- Avoid terms which equate the person with the ability or disability, eg 'an epileptic'
- Use terms that recognise 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 mental health, for example, 'schizo', 'paranoid', 'mad' or 'psycho'. It is not appropriate or accurate 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 and do their job well.
- Parking spaces specifically designed for people who use wheelchairs are 'accessible parking spaces' not 'disabled parking spaces'. The same goes for accessible rooms, accessible lifts, accessible toilets, etc.
- Avoid the use of the term 'special' when referring to people with disability. They don't have 'special needs', they are not 'special', they don't require 'special handling'. Segregation of people with disability historically (and sometimes still) occurred under the banner of 'special'.

11. 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).

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.

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, such as 'bogans', 'westies', 'smiffies', etc.
- does not make value judgements 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.

12. Conclusion

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 minimising 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.

13. References

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