

Language Guide



Equality and Diversity UK
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Contents

2	Introduction
3	Key messages
4	Use of Language
5	Language Guide
15	Glossary of terms
20	Language in Recruitment
21	Sources

Introduction

Inclusive language puts our humanity at the centre; it allows everyone to feel recognised, valued, invited, and motivated to contribute at their highest level.

To become an anti-discriminatory organisation, you must take concrete action to embed an inclusive culture for staff, management, service users and stakeholders.

Learning about and using respectful, identity-affirming language is key to creating a welcoming environment that is anti-discriminatory and embraces diversity as a whole

The Inclusive Language Guide is intended as an evolving tool to help staff at all levels learn about and use inclusive language in institutional communications and everyday practice.

The intention of this guide is not to be prescriptive as much as instructive. The more we understand about language, descriptors, and their meanings, the more we can be intentional about how we speak and the impact of our words.

Key messages

Identity is personal: Every individual has the right to describe themselves as they wish.

Respect: Not everyone wants to share their identity. If you are leading a group or setting the stage in a conversation, create space for people to show up as they are to the extent that they wish to.

People-first language: We are all people with various attributes - a person who lives with mental illness, a person who is gay or heterosexual. It is generally advised not to lead with the attribute, as if that attribute defines the whole person – such as, a mentally ill person or an undocumented person.

Always, when in doubt, ask how a person refers to themselves or, for general usage, use people-first language but be open to correction. When we label people, it is as if that word wholly and forever defines them; it can also trigger biases in others. As people, our attributes can change over time.

Intellectual humility: Acknowledging that you understand the importance of, and intend to use, respectful language shows and invites humility. At the same time, avoid burdening others by asking them lots of questions about their identity and asking them to educate you. Seek to use language that makes people feel seen and heard and if you're unsure of the appropriate term, you can google it or ask a colleague if they know what the most inclusive and respectful term is.

Use of Language

Language is powerful. It can give us ways of expressing ourselves and it can validate our identities. Using inclusive language is an important part of establishing an inclusive workplace culture. However, language is also powerful in that it can reinforce harmful stereotypes and lead to offensive and discriminatory behaviours which have a huge impact on people's emotional safety and mental wellbeing.

As language is constantly evolving, it can be difficult to know what appropriate and inappropriate language is, how to address people and how not to offend. Sometimes, the fear of getting terminology wrong can lead to avoiding getting into discussions at all, which is very inhibiting and doesn't create the inclusive environment we aim to create.

It is likely that we are all going to say things at times that may impact people in a way we had not foreseen or intended. Self-education and practice is the preventative measure we can all take. As long as you are committed to using and learning about inclusive language, it's okay if you make the odd mistake along the way. Acknowledging and learning from mistakes is the important bit. When we know better, we can do better.

There isn't such a thing as a definitive list of words to avoid and words to use but we have created a guide below to give you some pointers based on a range of recent studies and surveys.

As we know, language is a shifting landscape and words we might use today may be considered outdated in the not-too-distant future.

You may wish to follow diversity charities on social media for regular language updates.

Language Guide

We hope the following guide will help you feel more confident in knowing what language is inclusive and which terms are best avoided.

Blue = Avoid

Purple = Inclusive language

WARNING

There is some offensive language (shown in Blue) in the following Language Guide that will be triggering for some people.

AGE

Avoid:

- Terms such as **old codger, old fart, old biddy**.
- Referring to people as **OAPS, pensioners, the youth, or youngsters**. Instead: **Older people, younger people**. But ask yourself first whether it is necessary to mention someone's age.
- Using microaggressive phrases such as **past it, over the hill, you can't teach an old dog new tricks**, or referring to someone as being **past their prime**.
- Asking a person **when do you plan to retire?** This can send the message that you think they should retire and could constitute harassment.
- Referring to a younger worker as a **kid** or **baby** or inferring that they are inexperienced or lacking knowledge.
- Making any comments about a person's hot flushes or **menopausal symptoms** (intersectional issue: Age and Sex)

PREGNANCY/ MATERNITY

Avoid:

- Using phrases such as **knocked up** or **up the duff** as they are likely to cause offense.
- Referring to **mothering** and **fathering**. Instead: use **parenting**.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Avoid:

- Derogatory and offensive terms such as **poof, f*ggot, dyke, lesbo**.
- Referring to gay people as **gays, heterosexuals, bisexuals**. Instead: **gay people, heterosexual people, bisexual people**. Some people identify as **queer**. This is a reclaimed word, but you may choose to be cautious when using it if you do not identify as such.
- Using the term **that's so gay** as it is homophobic language because it equates the word gay with rubbish.
- Using the term **admitted to being gay** as though it is something to own up to. Instead: the phrase is **coming out**. Note that it is the individual's choice who they tell so ensure you do not out someone.
- Saying **I don't have a problem with gay people**. Whilst the intent behind such a comment might be to demonstrate an inclusive attitude, this is a typical microaggression and can cause offence.
- Using **heterosexist language** that assumes a person is straight. E.g. Do you have a boyfriend? Instead: ask about a partner (but only if a relationship is established where it feels appropriate to ask).
- The term **sexual preference**. Some people say that it isn't a choice who they are attracted to. Instead: **Sexual orientation**.
- Referring to an individual as a **homosexual**. It is now considered old fashioned and offensive. Instead: **Gay** or **queer**. But ask yourself first whether it is necessary to mention someone's sexual orientation.

GENDER REASSIGNMENT

Avoid:

- Using the word **tranny**. This is a term which was used by some trans* people before it became a term of abuse. Some people have sought to reclaim the word. It should be avoided if you yourself do not identify as such.
- Using the word **Shemale** as this is an offensive term primarily used in the sex industry to suggest that a trans woman is a man. Instead: **A transgender or trans* man**= someone who has transitioned and identifies as a man. **A transgender or trans* woman**= someone who has transitioned and identifies as woman. **A trans* person. Transmasculine. Transfeminine. A person with a trans* history.** Of course, some people who have transitioned may simply refer to themselves as a **man**, a **woman**, or a **non-binary person**.
- Outing someone's trans* identity or trans* history is an offence. This is treated as highly sensitive information.
- The term **Transgenderist** which is an outdated medical term and likely to offend.
- The term **a person has transgendered**. Instead: **A person has transitioned**.
- **He/ she** binary language in policies and comms. Not everyone uses binary pronouns. Instead use **they**.
- Only offering binary titles such **Mr/ Mrs/ Miss**. **Mx is a nonbinary title**.
- Only offering binary gender options or **male/ female/ other**. Most people do not like to identify as 'other'. Instead give options to self-identify where possible or show **male/ female/ nonbinary options**.
- **Dead naming**. I.e. using the name, a person previously went by.
- **Misgendering**. I.e. using the incorrect pronouns.
- Making assumptions about a person's gender identity. It is okay to ask somebody what pronouns they use but you would offer your pronouns too.

Note that trans* with an asterisk is an inclusive term which encompasses genderfluid identities.

SEX

Sex and gender do not mean the same thing but the two do overlap. Sex refers to biological traits whereas gender refers to how a person identifies.

Avoid:

- Using offensive gendered terms such as **bird**, and misogynistic terms such as **slut** or **slag**.
- Gender-specific statements such as **man up**, **grow a pair** or **stop acting like a girl** to men or referring to women as **bossy**, **a bitch** or **hysterical**.
- Using gender-specific terms of endearment such as saying **pal**, **buddy** or **mate** to men and **love**, **darling** or **sweetheart** to women. If terms of endearment are appropriate to use, **use gender neutral terms**/ the same terms for everyone.
- Using language that excludes women. E.g., **Manning** should be replaced by **staffing** or **running**. **Manmade** should be replaced by **synthetic**. Likewise, **Postmen/ firemen** etc should be referred to as **postal workers** and **firefighters**.
- Using man or male as the norm. E.g., When somebody wants to make a statement, **he should**... Instead: **One**, **we** or **they** are more inclusive.
- Referring to a person's sex or gender when it is not relevant. E.g., a **male nurse** should be referred to as a **nurse**. A **female doctor** should be referred to as **a doctor**.
- Using the terms **girls and boys**, **ladies and gentlemen**, **brothers and sisters** Instead: **People**, **folks**, **everybody**, **all**, **siblings** are more inclusive of all genders.
- Referring to women as **females**. Women are often referred to in this way. Men are rarely referred to as males. Female can be used as an adjective E.g. One of my female co-workers. Avoid it as a noun.
- An imbalance in the way people are referred to. E.g., don't refer to some people in work as **men** and others as **girls**.

- Assuming that everyone identifies as **either male or female**. Some people identify as gender-neutral, gender-fluid or non-binary, therefore asking people about spouses and partners (should this feel appropriate) is more inclusive than saying husbands and wives, boyfriends, and girlfriends.
- The term **hermaphrodite**- an outdated and offensive term. Instead: **Intersex**.
- Paying compliments about a person's looks or outfits unless you know them very well and they understand the intent, as this could be considered sexual harassment.

RELIGION/ BELIEFS

Avoid:

- Referring to person's religion where it isn't necessary. E.g., **The Muslim man, the Jewish woman**.
- Stereotyping people based on their religion or belief.
- Passing comments on how a person practises their religion which would constitute a microaggression. E.g. **Should you be eating that? Aren't you supposed to be fasting?** etc.
- Using language that excludes such as by asking a person what their **Christian name** is as opposed to their **first name**.
- Using language that could be considered offensive and blasphemous to some people. E.g., **Jesus Christ, Oh my God**.
- Making negative comments about someone not having a religion.

DISABILITY

As a society, we have moved away from language linked to the medical model of disability (based on a medical diagnosis and viewed as something negative) towards the social model of disability with its inclusive and destigmatising language. Much of the language to avoid listed below is linked to the medical model of disability.

Avoid:

- Using offensive terms that have medical origins such as **handicapped, spastic, mongoloid, cretin**, and any abbreviations of such words.
- Offensive language such as **retarded** or **lame**.
- Using the term, **the disabled or the blind**. Instead: use **disabled people, people with a visual impairment, or people who experience...** E.g. **They have epilepsy, they experience anxiety** etc. People who are born without hearing are referred to as **Deaf** with a capital D. Note that some people within the Deaf community who use sign language do not consider themselves to have a disability.
- Using the terms **an autistic, a dyslexic**. Instead: **A neurodiverse person, an autistic person, a person with dyslexia**.
- The use of language that refers to a Disabled person as a victim. E.g. A person is **suffering from**, they are **wheelchair-bound**, they are **crippled by**, they are **afflicted by**. Instead, say that **they have an impairment, or they are disabled**.
- Language such as **dumb** and **mute**. Instead: **A person with non-verbal communication, a person with speech difficulty**.
- Refer to a person as **able-bodied**. Instead: The opposite of disabled is **non-disabled** or **ambulant**.

WARNING – there is offensive language in this section (shown in Blue) that may be triggering

- Underplaying mental health conditions such as by referring to a person as a **schizo** or **psycho** or by saying a person **schized out** to mean angry and upset.
- Likewise underplaying conditions such as OCD by referring to someone as **a bit OCD** simply because they have a tidy desk for example.
- The term **mentally ill**. Instead: **A person experiencing mental health issues, someone who is experiencing emotional distress, a person who has a mental health condition, a person with anxiety, depression, PTSD etc.**
- Referring to someone as having **special needs**. It can be considered patronising and offensive. Instead: **A learning disability, a learning difficulty, a person who has ADHD, a person with autism, a neurodivergent individual.**
- Terms which may cause offence such as **mad, crazy, mental, looney**.
- Saying that a toilet is a **disabled toilet**. Instead: **Accessible toilet.**
- Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things. E.g. **Fallen on deaf ears**. Or **Blind drunk**.
- Idiomatic phrases- these can create confusion for some neurodivergent individuals who may take the phrase literally.

MARRIAGE/ CIVIL PARTNERSHIP

Avoid:

- Using language such as **ball and chain** or **under the thumb**.
- Assuming you know the sex of the partner. Avoid a **heterosexist perspective** of assuming everyone is straight.

RACE/ NATIONALITY/ ETHNICITY

Race is a social construct going back to the 1700s and rooted in White Supremacy. Scientists sought to categorise people into distinct racial groups based on skin colour and other physical attributes and then created myths about those groups, creating and perpetuating inequalities. Whilst race is a made-up concept, we cannot ignore the fact that we have been racialised and therefore racial identity is important to some people, particularly when it comes to addressing racial inequalities.

Ethnicity often refers to shared cultural practices, traditions, language, nationality, and ancestry. Ethnicity and nationality are the terms more likely to be used in workplace diversity questionnaires.

Avoid:

- Highly offensive terminology such as the **N-word**, **Negr***, **C**n**, **P-word (P*ki)**, **W*g**, **Ch*nky**, **Y*d**
- The outdated and offensive terms: **Coloured**, **Half-caste**, **Gyppo**, **Pikie**, **Tinker**, **Taff**, **Jock**, **Paddy**, **Polacks**, **Krauts**.
- Referring to a person's race, ethnicity, or skin colour when it is not relevant. E.g., the **Black teacher**.
- The term **non-White**. Instead refer to a person's ethnic group as mentioned below.
- Referring to people as **Blacks** or **Asians**. Instead: If it is relevant to talk about a group of people, say **Black people**, a person of South Asian heritage (**Indian**, **Pakistani**, **Bangladeshi**), a person of South East Asian heritage (**Chinese**, **Japanese**, **Vietnamese**) a person of African and White heritage, **Asian people** (although be cautious with this term- where it is relevant to mention, be specific. E.g., **Pakistani**, **Chinese** etc. **Mixed race*** (some people use this term and others do not), **mixed heritage**, **mixed ethnicity**).
- Using the term **Caucasian**. This comes from a racist classification system and therefore should be avoided. Instead: **White**.
- Use capitalised letters when describing ethnicity- **Black**, **White**, **Asian**.
- Using colonial terms **nitty gritty** or **uppity**.

- The term **BAME**. This term is problematic and should be avoided, as it puts Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic people into a category together, as though they are a homogenous group with similar lived experiences. Instead: **ethnically diverse, people who experience racial inequality** or **Global majority** are all widely used.
- Using language that presents Black as bad and White as good. E.g., **Blacklist, black sheep of the family, whitewash, whiter than white**. Instead: **Boycott/ embargo, outcast, cover up, purer than pure**.
- Avoid the microaggression **Where are you from?** When you are asking about a person's heritage. Instead: (if it is necessary to know or there is an established respectful relationship): **How do you describe your ethnicity?**
- Shortening a person's name or changing it to make it 'easier to say'. Ask a person how to pronounce their name and practice saying it. It is a part of their identity therefore it is important.
- Referring to **you people**, or **your people** as an ethnic or racial group even if intended as a compliment, e.g., **'you people are such hard workers'**.
- Using phrases such as **ghetto, urban or tribe**.
- Using the phrase **gypped** which is a racial slur. Instead: **Duped or ripped off**.
- Master/ slave language. E.g. **master suite, master copy, slaving over something**. Instead: **Primary/ main suite, copy, working hard at**
- Avoid the term **Third World** or **Developing countries**. Instead: **Low- and Middle-Income Countries**
- Be aware that some people use the term People of Colour (the primary term used in the USA) whereas some find it problematic.
- Abbreviating somebody's nationality. Some abbreviations such as **Brit** are considered appropriate, but others are not simply abbreviated terms but terms of abuse and considered highly offensive. The **P word (p*ki)** is one of these examples.

And finally, avoid using the word **normal** as its opposite is abnormal and does not promote inclusion.

Glossary of terms

Ableism: Prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities. A belief that disabled people are inferior to non-disabled people.

Accessibility: The promotion of equal access for all requires an understanding of the physical, cultural, and social barriers that can prevent or inhibit participation.

Historically, the term has been used largely to denote physical accessibility in relation to the barriers faced by disabled people. Improving accessibility has included making changes to buildings and also improving and extending the availability of accessible technologies. It is important to recognise the barriers to access are also faced by non-disabled people, particularly those from marginalised or minoritised groups.

Ageism: Prejudice or discrimination based on a person's age. An assumption that a person is more or less capable of doing something based on their age.

Ally: Someone who supports others in the workplace, particularly in relation to an individual's or group's underrepresented or minoritised status. Allies challenge any discriminatory policies, processes, procedures, practices, and people. It is a proactive role- very different to a bystander who may not discriminate but doesn't challenge exclusionary behaviours either.

Affinity groups: Often referred to as an Employee Resource Group, an affinity group is a group of individuals in an organisation who meet to explore and gain recognition around a protected characteristic or characteristics. E.g., Race, Disability, Sexual Orientation.

Anti-racism: This doesn't just refer to a person or organisation that isn't racist. Again, it is a proactive stance whereby an individual or company seeks to dismantle racism.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth. Non-trans is another word for this.

Dominant culture: A culture based on a set of characteristics, beliefs and values which are deemed to be typical or 'the norm'. Individuals outside of dominant culture can experience marginalisation when their identities, values and beliefs are devalued or considered less important.

Diverse/Diversity: Diversity means individual uniqueness. It encompasses the protected characteristics but extends beyond them too. For example, we think differently, we have different lived experiences and learn in different ways. Celebrating diversity is about recognising and embracing the fact that every individual has a unique contribution to make. Appreciating diversity is a more positive phrase than 'tolerating' difference'.

It encourages the exploration and valuing of differences and a readiness to develop mutual understanding that goes beyond tolerance to a broader appreciation of the varied nature of human beings.

Equality: Fair and equal treatment. Equal opportunities.

Equity: Ensuring resources and opportunities are allocated according to need in order to level playing fields and create equal outcomes.

Gender identity: A person's perception/ self-identification of their gender. This may or may not be aligned with their birth sex.

Heterosexism

This term describes an attitude that assumes heterosexuality is the only valid sexual identity, and makes products, policy, or practice on this basis.

Intersectionality: A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to the overlapping identities such as race and sex, or sex and social class which means people may experience particular inequalities and discrimination based on intersecting systems of oppression.

LGBTQIA: An acronym made up of a range of identities which sit outside of heteronormativity. Lesbian (a woman who is attracted to women), Gay (a man who is attracted to men and a woman who is attracted to women), Bisexual (a person who is attracted to people of more than one gender), Trans* (a person's gender identity is different to their sex assigned at birth), Queer (previously a slur, it was reclaimed in the 80s. The term is often used by those who do not wish to conform to specific labels based on sexual orientation and gender identity), Intersex (born with a combination of biological characteristics which do not fit with societal assumptions of what constitutes male or female- they may identify as male, female, intersex, or non-binary), Asexual (someone who doesn't experience sexual attraction).

Minoritised/ Marginalised: Groups who are given less access to resources than dominant groups.

Microaggressions: Comments and actions that come out of conscious and unconscious biases or prejudices towards certain groups of people. E.g., Where are you from? But where are you *really* from? You're actually really articulate for... Not bad...for a woman.

Non-binary: A person who does not identify within the gender binary of male or female. Some non-binary people may identify with other terms for example genderfluid, gender neutral or agender.

Personal Pronouns: The pronouns people use. E.g., He/ him She/ her They/ Their, Ze/ Zir. Some people choose not to use pronouns at all and will just ask that a person uses their name. It is becoming more common for people to share their pronouns on name badges, email signatures and LinkedIn profiles to avoid misgendering and to be respectful of each other's choice of pronouns.

Positive action: Refers to the proactive steps taken by an organisation to minimise disadvantage and encourage participation of underrepresented groups. E.g., a job advert might be posted in a range of publications where it will be seen by a more diverse cross section of a community than if it was just posted on one job site where the demographic of the reader may be fairly homogenous.

Positive discrimination: This is illegal in the UK (with one or two exceptions). It is where a person only gets a job because of their protected characteristic/s and other applicants who do not possess those characteristics do not get an opportunity to apply. An exception to this would be in a women's only hostel where the job advert could specify that they are looking for a female support worker.

Racism: Racism refers to the ideology of the superiority of one particular ethnic or cultural group over another. The notion of superiority is expressed through beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate injustice and prompt discrimination. It occurs at different but interrelated levels.

- **Institutional racism** is best defined by the description in the Macpherson Report into the Steven Lawrence Inquiry:

Institutional racism is the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. It persists because of the failure of the organisation openly and adequately to recognise and address its existence and causes by policy, example, and leadership. [Macpherson Inquiry report: Chap 6. 6:34]

- **Personal racism** It includes racist abuse and racial harassment, physical attack, allowing personal assumptions, prejudices, or stereotypes to influence recruitment and selection of staff and collusion with the tolerance of racist language and jokes.
- **Cultural racism** is revealed when a dominant culture imposes its values, beliefs, and practices on others. This may be entirely unwitting with the dominant culture taking it for granted that either there is no alternative view or that its assumptions should prevail.

Tone policing: A tactic used to silence a person's views by commenting on the perceived emotion behind what they are saying rather than the content of what they are saying. Minoritised groups often experience tone-policing by being told they should "calm down" or stop being "angry and aggressive" (a harmful intersectional microaggression often used towards Black women to discredit what they are saying).

Underrepresented group: Demographic groups who are underrepresented within an organisation. Often (but not always) historically marginalised groups.

White privilege: This does not mean a person is born into privilege in a socio-economic sense. It means that a person does not experience inequalities due to their skin colour. It refers to the absence of obstacles a person experiences because of their skin colour.

Language in Recruitment:

The language we use in the recruitment process is incredibly important. Inclusive language helps to create an inclusive environment and language that excludes (albeit inadvertently) can do the opposite. The job application with its person specification and job specification is the first thing a prospective applicant will see. The language used here will give an insight into the culture of inclusion in the organisation. It is crucial that it doesn't contain biased language, as this could reduce the talent pool.

Here are some tips:

Colour code: **avoid** | **preferred**

- You may wish to consider creating new titles for any roles that have become synonymous with a particular gender. E.g. The role of a **secretary** could be redefined as a **front of house assistant** or an **office assistant**.
- Be aware of other words within a job advert and personal spec that are typically associated with a particular gender. E.g., **Ambitious, dynamic, assertive, driven, competitive** are known to appeal more to male applicants. Use the free programme Gender Decoder to ensure that gendered language is balanced and/ or neutralized.
- Avoid gendered/ age-biased language such as **tech ninja**.
- Avoid superlatives as these have been proven to put off many female applicants. E.g., **World class, expert, superior**
- Avoid referring to a prospective candidate in the job spec using binary pronouns as this will exclude nonbinary applicants. E.g., Instead of saying '**He/ she will be expected to....**,' opt for '**The successful candidate/ They/ you will be expected to...**'
- Avoid using language that contains age bias. E.g., **Bright, young, energetic, junior, recent graduate**.

- Avoid unnecessary jargon.
- Using the terms **Cultural fit/ team fit**: The term 'cultural fit' is problematic because it asks that people fit a mould rather than being their unique selves. Asking people to 'fit in' would be highly problematic.
- Whilst a group of individuals can be referred to as diverse, refrain from saying **diverse talent** or **diverse candidate** when referring to candidates. Alternate terms include **candidates from underrepresented backgrounds** or **historically underrepresented groups**.

Sources:

- Diversity in Diction- Equality in Action (TUC)
- Hoxby
- Gov.uk
- The Law Society
- Handshake
- Milton Keynes College
- Stonewall
- The McPherson Report



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