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Inclusive Language Guide



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Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

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Why this document

The document you are reading is an initiative of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. The MPI supports a working environment in which all employees are equally valued and supported. We recognise the positive value of diversity and inclusion, promote equity, and challenge discrimination. We aim to provide a working environment with room for differences, where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Inclusive language supports this view. It acknowledges and promotes diversity and inclusion, takes differences into account and respects them. Therefore, the DEI Committee would like to ask you to read this document, refer back to it when necessary, and offer suggestions if you have them.

How to use it

This guide focuses on advice for written communication. It covers multiple topics in which inclusive language might be relevant. It shows examples and terminology that relate to this. If you encounter these topics in your writing, it is a good idea to check the guidelines. If you cannot find a specific term in our guide, further research might be necessary. You can always contact the DEI Committee about this (see below).

Working document

This guide is not perfect. Discussions surrounding inclusive language are ongoing and preferred terms will change over time. This is therefore a living document. We encourage people to contribute to it. Additions, questions, or remarks can be sent to the DEI Committee (DEI@mpi.nl).

Short checklist

Everyone has blind spots. Ask yourself the questions below when you are writing any text. It will help you make sure you are reading your own work through a different lens.

- **What am I trying to say?**

What and who are you talking about? What groups are represented? In other words, try to focus on what *exactly* you mean rather than using a proxy or terms you're used to seeing. For example, you might mean "people between the ages of 70 and 80" rather than "older people" (which is a more imprecise or vague term). Another example: in a production study, you might mean "people

with voices with a fundamental frequency between 165 and 255 Hz” rather than “women”.

- **Is it relevant to include?**

Include only relevant information and specify characteristics only when necessary. For example, if talking about a participant it might not be necessary to say “a female participant” if their gender is not relevant. In that case, saying “a participant” might be sufficient.

- **What have I written?**

What words have I chosen and what do they mean? Check your writing with this guide and be aware of the definition of terms that are not included. It’s ok to look up the definitions for terms that change over time, especially to see if there are different suggestions for those terms that might fit the context/meaning better.

General tips

- When in doubt, check again. Contact the DEI Committee if necessary.
- Have someone else read your work. Two pairs of eyes are better than one.

Topics

1. Age

Be precise when describing the age of individual people or groups.

- **Numerical ages and years**

Example: Survey respondents were between ages 60 and 75.

Example: People born between 1946 and 1964.

- **Terms for different stages of life**

Fertilised egg: from conception to 14 days

Embryo: from 2 to 6 weeks

Fetus: during pregnancy (more clinical, maybe not for informal contexts)

Baby: during pregnancy, especially in the 2-3rd trimester (not really for research purposes, but better for informal contexts)

Infant: at birth and up to 1 year.

Toddler: 1 to 3 years

Child: 4 to 12 years

Teenager: 13 to 19 years

Young people: 16 to 24 years

Adult: generally from age 18 but this may vary.

What to avoid

- Generational names: Boomers, Millennials, Gen Z.

Example: Millennials scored higher on this scale than Boomers.

- Relative terms: young, old

Define the relative terms first before you use them.

Example: The first group was young, the second group old.

Example: The first group was made up of people from 20 to 25 years of age. The second group 26 to 30-year-olds. The first group was slower than the latter group.

Words to avoid:

Elderly, middle aged, pensioner, senior

2. (Learning) Disability and neurodiversity

People-first language vs. identity-first language

Identity-first language uses identity as an adjective to describe a person or group.

Example: They are autistic students.

Example: She is a Deaf woman.

Some people prefer identity-first language because they see their disability or neurodiversity as being a permanent and fundamental part of their identity. This is usually preferred for instance in Blind, Deaf, and autistic communities.

With person-first language, the person is emphasized, not the individual's disability. This is usually preferred when talking about illness.

For example: He is a person with dementia.

It is a good idea to check the preferred term of the group you are talking about and pay attention to how the group refers to themselves. Keep in mind that there might be different opinions, but in any case, make sure you centre the person rather than those around them and think from the perspective of the person.

It is always a good idea to ask when in doubt. Most people find it positive to be asked how they prefer to be referred to because it gives room for their identity and preference rather than assuming their position or their community's.

What to avoid

- Terms that imply restriction

Example: He is wheelchair-bound.

Example: He is a wheelchair-user.

- Framing: victim, survivor

Opinions differ on terms that encourage framing. Be mindful of this.

- Vague labels

Example: He is high functioning

- Euphemisms

Example: He is physically challenged

Words to avoid:

Normal, ordinary

3. Gender

Gender is a social construct. It refers to the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors that a specific culture associates with a person's biological sex. Sex refers to biological sex assignment, e.g. sex assigned at birth.

Gender identity is the personal sense of one's own gender. It may or may not correspond to a person's (presumed) sex assigned at birth. This is not to be confused with sexual orientation, which is a person's sexual and emotional attraction to another person (for more information and an infographic see [this page](#)).

Please use the correct term only when relevant. From the APA style manuals (7th ed.):

‘Describe at the appropriate level of specificity. There are times when gender, sexual orientation, etc. matter for specific reasons, and when it doesn't. If it doesn't matter, don't use it.’

Pronouns

Personal pronouns are words we use to address ourselves and each other. For example, I/me/mine, you/your, he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs.

You can use the identified pronouns of the person you are referring to.

Example: I think Robin has left his coat.

If you are unsure of the pronouns of a person, they might have shared it somewhere like a bio on social media or an email signature. It is also possible to ask someone what pronouns they would like you to use for them. Be aware that the pronouns someone uses may vary based on language and/or social context, and use the pronouns the person asks you to use for them.

In case of doubt, it is advisable to use the singular ‘they’. The APA style manual (7th ed.) prefers this option overall: ‘The third person singular use of "they" is recommended to avoid gender/sexual orientation bias, and when that is unknown/not relevant to what is being discussed/studied. Only use "he/she" sparingly’.

Example: I think they have left their coat

What to avoid

- Gendered nouns

Example: mankind (humankind), man-made (manufactured)

- Gendered occupational terms

Example: policeman (police officer), mailman (postal worker), housewife (house maker), stewardess (attendant).

Words to avoid:

Binary, Opposite gender

4. Racial and ethnic identity

Race refers to physical differences that groups and cultures consider socially significant. Ethnicity describes the culture of people with shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs.

Use the terms that people of that community prefer and be specific, for instance:

Example: They are European American.

Example: She is a Chinese person.

Please remember that how people within a group refer to each other might not be the same as how they want to be referenced by people outside of that group.

Please be aware that these terms change and evolve.

What to avoid

- Pejorative and dated terms

Example: oriental, Afro-American, exotic, Eskimo

- Imprecise language

Example: minority (underrepresented groups)

5. Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status is a way of describing individuals or groups based on a combination of education, income, and occupation.

In the case of socioeconomic status, **person-first language** is preferred. That way, the person is emphasized and not the individual's circumstances.

Be specific and use person-first language:

Example: They are both experiencing homelessness.

Example: Participants whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold.

What to avoid

- Language that focuses on lacking

Example: high school dropouts, poorly educated

- Pejorative and dated terms

Example: poor, ghetto

Sources

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