

Inclusive Language Guide

What is inclusive language?

Inclusive language is language that is respectful and promotes the acceptance and value of all people. It is language free from words, phrases or tones that demean, insult, exclude, stereotype, infantilise or trivialise people, based on their membership to a certain group or because of a particular attribute. Inclusive language is not about impinging on free speech or political correctness; it is about communicating in a way that is accessible and respectful, and includes and empowers all members of your audience. Language is dynamic and fluid and the meaning and connotations of words can change rapidly. It is important that you apply the inclusive language principles outlined in this guideline, rather than learning specific appropriate phrases, as these may change over time.

Why is language important?

Language is extremely powerful. It can consciously or unconsciously offend, intimidate, belittle, exclude, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and contribute to the unequal status of individuals. Language can also have very positive effects on people. When inclusive language is used, it can make people feel included, valued, and empowered.

Principles of inclusive language

- Any group interactions should be applied with care and consideration, with an awareness of the diversity within and between groups, and always be couched in inclusive terms.
- Use people-centric language, which focuses on the person and reflects the individuality of people. People-centric language does not classify or stereotype people based on their association or identity with a group or culture.
- Only reference personal attributes or characteristics when it is relevant to the context.
- Consider a strengths-based approach (recognising the resilience of individuals and focussing on abilities, knowledge and capacities), rather than a deficit approach (focussing on deficiencies or supposed failings of a person, or group of people).
- Where appropriate, ask about the language the person prefers and respect their wishes. Don't make assumptions about people or their characteristics based on stereotypes or limited information.
- Be conscious of the implications of your language. Avoid excluding others or making people invisible by your choice of language. Avoid language and expressions that disparage or trivialise others.
- Where possible, empower the person or group to speak for themselves. If you do need to speak on the behalf of a group of people, it is very important that you consult widely to ensure that the language you use is reflective of the group.
- Address and remove stereotypes and myths. If someone uses inappropriate language in your presence speak out against it and correct the inappropriate language used, or report the behaviour if you feel unsafe to speak up.
- Ensure that the language and the delivery of your material is accessible to a diverse audience with diverse needs.
- Be aware of the context of the language being used. Some terms are ok to use by people as a means of claiming their identity, but are not ok, and can be seen as derogatory, when used by others.

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

- Is it necessary to refer to a person or groups' personal characteristics?
- If it is, are the references to personal characteristics couched in inclusive terms?
- Do the references to people reflect the diversity of the intended audience, and is the material accessible to the intended audience?
- Are you excluding people in the design and delivery of your material?

Examples of good practice inclusive language

Below are some examples of good practice inclusive language when referring to a person's characteristics, or a group of people, and examples of language to avoid.

Some general principles to consider:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Good practice inclusive language

Be conscious of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Acknowledge the historical context and present day systemic barriers faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Always use capitals when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, i.e. 'First Peoples', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' or 'Aboriginal' person. Where possible, consult with the local Traditional Owner groups to ensure that the language and practices are reflective of the community. Refer to an Aboriginal person by their clan if it is known, for example 'Turrbul woman' rather than 'an Aboriginal woman'.

Language and practices to avoid

Always use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in full and don't abbreviate to 'ATSI'. Aboriginal should not be used as a noun, e.g., the aboriginal. The word 'aborigine' should be avoided when referring to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as it is a generic term for the original inhabitant of any country. Do not isolate or exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, for example stating that 'all Australians have access to quality medical care' excludes the lived experience of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Do not trivialise or misrepresent important cultural beliefs and practices such as referring to the Dreamtime as myths or legends. Do not make assumptions about someone's ancestry based on their physical features.

Additional Reference: [language-guide-1.pdf \(reconciliation.org.au\)](#).

Gender

Good practice inclusive language

- When introducing or referring to people, respectfully ask them for their preferred pronouns (e.g., he, she, they) and use them correctly.
- Use gender neutral pronouns where possible e.g., avoid 'the new employer may exercise his right' instead use 'the new employer may exercise their right'.

Language and practices to avoid

- Avoid using unnecessary gender references, e.g., the male nurse or the woman doctor,
- Do not make an assumption about someone's gender based on their name or physical features.
- Do not use gender references in a demeaning or trivialising way e.g., 'throw like a girl'.

- Do not infantilise particular groups (e.g. referring to groups or individuals as a child or in a way which denies their maturity in age or experience), for example, the 'girls in the office'.

Culture

Good practice inclusive language

Only reference someone's cultural background when it is appropriate for the context. Generally it is unnecessary to refer to someone's cultural background, but if you do need to use people-centric language e.g., person of Sudanese descent. Educate yourself on someone's culture and respect cultural differences that may be present. In cross-cultural communication you should ensure that your language is simple and accessible.

Language and practices to avoid

Avoid undue emphasis on differences, e.g., introducing all your colleagues, but describing one as 'Chinese'. Avoid making someone's culture invisible, e.g., the use of umbrella terms such as 'Asians' ignores the multiple ethnicities within Asia. Instead refer to the persons ethnicity where appropriate, e.g., Indonesian, Chinese etc

Disability

Good practice inclusive language

- Use people centric language, for example person with disability or people with disability.
- Ensure that the language and delivery of your message is accessible to all audiences. Utilise the accessibility check in programs, such as Microsoft Word, and ensure that you practice website accessibility.

Language and practices to avoid

- Avoid inappropriate language such as cripple, handicapped, mental patient, 'wheelchair bound' and 'disabled person'.
- Avoid using 'inspirational' language to describe someone with a disability, e.g., saying someone with a disability is 'an inspiration', or 'brave', or 'amazing', for doing everyday things such as going to work.
- Never make assumptions about disability, as some disabilities may not be visible.

Sexuality

Good practice inclusive language

Use inclusive language such as 'partner' (rather than 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'), to refer to a person's significant other, unless the preferred term is specified by that person. Consider, referring to 'sexuality, gender and sex diversity' rather than the LGBTIQ+ acronym, in order to be more inclusive.

Language and practices to avoid

Avoid using 'gay' in a derogatory way, e.g., 'that's so gay'. Avoid making assumptions about someone's sexuality or building stereotypes based on a person's sexuality.

Additional Reference: [LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Language Guide | Victorian Government \(www.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.vic.gov.au/lgbtiq-inclusive-language-guide)

Age

Good practice inclusive language

Only refer to age when relevant to the context, and when it is necessary to use people-centric language e.g., older adults or younger people.

Language and practices to avoid

Avoid stereotypes, e.g., old people will not adapt to new technologies, or “Millennials” are compulsive job-hoppers.