

Inclusive Language Guide

Language evolves, and so should we. This guide offers recommendations for language that aims to acknowledge differences, convey respect, and promote dignity. By being mindful of our words, we can create a more welcoming environment for everyone. This guide is not comprehensive; it is a starting point. Learning and reflection are ongoing.

A definition of Belonging: Having the the voice, power, and tools to improve your circumstances and shape your future. The Northland Foundation is building up belonging in our region along geographic, racial, and socioeconomic lines, or place, race, and class. See <https://northlandfdn.org/notes/building-up-belonging-march-2023/>.

General Guidelines

- When unsure, ask people for their preferred terminology.
- Use person-first language, leading with person not label e.g. “people who are unhoused” not “homeless people.”
- Avoid generalizations and lumping people together in ways that ignore individuality and differences e.g. “The Black community” or “The Native community.”
- Avoid cultural appropriation e.g. “rain dance,” “pow wow,” “high on the totem pole,” or “spirit animal”.
- Recognize that different people or groups may have different ideas of what is appropriate or acceptable. When in doubt—be curious. Ask!
- Educate yourself on what different terms mean and what is currently considered most respectful.

Race & Ethnicity

BIPOC is still used but is falling from favor, largely because “people of color” is ambiguous. If you use it, spell it out in the first mention, “Black, Indigenous, people of color”. Black and Indigenous are capitalized, people of color is not.

Option: “African American, Native American, and members of other historically under-represented, underserved groups”

Do not use “minorities” as a blanket term. Do not use “non-white”.

This is an opportunity to be thoughtful about who your program or initiative anticipates serving, for ex:

- Organizations led by and/or primarily serving historically underserved and under-resourced populations
- Native Americans within our service area
- Entrepreneurs who, due to race or ethnicity, have often had less access to financing
- Tribal government entities and Native American-led nonprofit organizations

Instead of:

Minorities →
or BIPOC

Try this:

Be more inclusive and broad:

- People belonging to historically under-represented and underserved groups
- People and communities whose access to opportunities has been limited

Or, more specificity may work:

Federal agency data collection categories, as of April 2024:

- Black or African American
- American Indian (use Native American)
- Asian
- Hispanic or Latina/o

Hispanic=Spanish-speaking countries, Latino=Latin American countries speaking any language. “Latinx” is gender-neutral but may not be preferred.

- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Age

Avoid ageist language and assumptions based on age, both to older adults as well as children and youth.

Aim to use language that conveys the value of all ages.

Instead of:

Elderly →

Youngster →
kiddo, kid

Try this:

Older adult or Elder (esp. if referring to Native American elders)

Young person, youth, children and youth

Inclusive Language Guide

Sex & Gender

Avoid referencing gender or sex unless its directly relevant.

Respect individuals' self-identified pronouns. If you need to know how to refer to someone correctly, but are unsure, ask: "May I ask what your pronouns are?"

Use gender-neutral language – they/them/their are accepted singular pronouns. "Where is Pat's office? Their office is down the hall."

Do not make assumptions about identity based on gender expression (clothing, hair, make-up, etc.).

Educate yourself on terms e.g. cis, non-binary, queer.

Instead of:

Try this:

He or she →

They

Husband, wife →

Partner

Ladies and →
gentlemen

Everyone, honored guests

Manpower →

Workforce, workers, personnel

Homosexual →

LGBTQ+ (*lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, other*),
LGBTQ2S+ (*includes 2-Spirit*)

Transgendered →

Transgender

Socioeconomic Status & Place

Avoid language that reinforces stereotypes around economic status or place/community e.g. ghetto, hick, redneck.

Use language that is mindful of the value of lived experience, the humanity of all people, and the dignity of all work.

Instead of:

Try this:

The homeless →

People who are unhoused, experiencing homelessness, without stable housing, housing insecure

Upper class →

Wealthy, affluent

Lower class →

Working class, people facing economic barriers

Poor →
neighborhood

Under-resourced community,
community with a high rate of poverty

Criminals →

People with a felony conviction, people who have been justice-involved

Disability, Mental Health & Addiction

Use respectful and accurate language when discussing disabilities, mental health, or addiction. Avoid stigmatization.

Focus on abilities not limitations, on people not labels.

Avoid ableist language e.g. "Find on page 5" vs. "See page 5". Don't use as a pejorative e.g. "What, are you deaf?"

"People with disabilities" is very broad. Disabilities include "invisible" ones e.g. dyslexia, brain injury, heart conditions, and more. Consider if you can be more precise.

NOTE: Many people with autism or who are deaf consider it inherent to their identity. "They're deaf" or "autistic adult" may be accepted.

Instead of:

Try this:

Handicapped →

Person with a disability, quadraplegic, people with vision impairment, etc.

Confined to a →
wheelchair

Uses a wheelchair

Suffers from/ →
Victim of

Has/lives with (a disability or illness)

Mentally ill →

Person with a mental health condition, experiencing a mental health crisis, has lived experience of mental illness

Addict →

Person with a substance use disorder, person experiencing/living with addiction