

EDUCAUSE Inclusive Language Guide

Version: 1.7

Date: Last updated August 23, 2023

EDUCAUSE Review follows [The Chicago Manual of Style](#) (18th edition) as its main source of reference for style questions.

For spelling, please see [Merriam-Webster's free online dictionary](#).

See also:

[EDUCAUSE Style: Words & Terms](#)

[EDUCAUSE Style: Concepts & Usage](#)

Language embodies values and perspectives, some of which are rooted in systems that discriminate against certain groups of people. Over time, specific terms and ways of using language become established parts of the lexicon, and although their association with discriminatory ideas might no longer be obvious, they continue to be harmful. EDUCAUSE is committed to starting and sustaining a dialogue about the ways in which we can uncover and understand the harm that language can cause. We developed this guide to articulate the ways we at EDUCAUSE will use or avoid various terms, with the goal of being inclusive and consistent across publications. We also provide sources and the rationale behind those decisions, which can prompt reflection and perhaps discussion about the reasons certain terms and locutions are harmful to particular groups. The intent of the guide is to be an editorial resource, not explicitly as a tool for advocacy, though that can be a product of dialogue about the issues covered.

Also, the guide is silent on matters not germane to EDUCAUSE. Many clearly offensive terms are still regularly used but are extremely unlikely to appear in a resource EDUCAUSE is producing (and if they did, we would, of course, remove them).

Caveat: Although these discussions are deeply important, many of the questions won't be answered with a single solution that is acceptable to everyone. One person's sense of inclusive language can be another person's definition of thin-skinned hypersensitivity. Writers and editors should approach these issues with curiosity and use discretion.

Language and cultural norms change, so this guide will be a living document. Please share suggestions, resources, comments, or questions by completing this short form:

[**Submit a Suggestion**](#)

Principles

Keep these principles in mind for how you use language.

- **Speak about characteristics only when they are relevant:** If a person's gender or sexual orientation or race or disability isn't germane, leave it out.
- **Understand the implications of person-first language versus identity-first language:** Identity-first language puts the characteristic first, as in "a disabled person," while person-first language would say "a person with a disability." Individuals often prefer one form over the other, and some organizations (such as the National Federation of the Blind) have called for identity-first language for their audience. Whenever possible, ask about and respect choices when people express a preference for a particular articulation. Similarly, people are not their circumstances—don't use terms such as "the disabled," "the differently abled," "the disadvantaged," "the homeless," or "a transgender" as nouns. Also, racial and ethnic terms should be used as adjectives, rather than nouns.
- **Understand that bias comes in many dimensions:** An incomplete list includes race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, age, sex, gender, weight/health, wealth/income, politics, parental/family status, religion (including those who are not religious), nation of origin, immigration status, language/accent, and education level.
- **Be aware that some dimensions of bias are invisible:** People don't always choose to disclose their religion, their sexual orientation, a cognitive disability, or other aspects of themselves. Don't make assumptions.
- **Recognize and avoid false hierarchies:** Language can telegraph notions of "normalcy" or superiority (e.g., White over non-White, straight over gay/lesbian, abled over disabled, male over female), and these can be subtle. Language rooted in such hierarchies includes master/slave, whitelist/blacklist, and other idioms rooted in "white = good, black = bad." Be aware of and avoid gendered language (e.g., chairman, mankind, manpower, freshmen). Use equivalent language—for example, in contexts where comparing binary gendered groups of people is unavoidable, use "men" and "women" (not "men" and "girls"); be consistent in whether you refer to people by last name (preferred) or first name (don't refer to men by their last names and women by their first names).

Resources

- The [Diversity/Inclusivity Style Guide](#) from California State University covers many of these issues and provides links to related resources.
- The [Bias-Free Language](#) guide from the APA provides broad guidelines and specific examples, organized into categories. The APA has also created guidelines

for [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#).

- [A Progressive's Style Guide](#) takes a broad view of inclusive language and features extensive lists of terms to avoid and alternatives to use.

Dimensions

Discussions about language and usage can be specific to several categories. The discussions that follow focus on those bias dimensions that are most relevant to EDUCAUSE resources.

Gender/Sex

The term “sex” refers to a person’s physiology: male, female, or intersex. “[Gender](#)” refers to how a person identifies and can be articulated in many ways, including man, woman, nonbinary, agender, pangender, neither, or genderfluid. Gender *identity* can differ from gender *expression* (how a person dresses or otherwise presents in physical terms). “Transgender” refers to people whose gender identity or expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. “Cisgender” refers to people whose gender identity or expression is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

The terms “ladies,” “gals,” and “girls” have historically been used in ways that often demean women, and they should be avoided. “Guys” is rarely appropriate for printed copy, and it should never be used to refer to groups of people that include women. Forms that include a field to indicate a relationship should include “spouse” and/or “partner,” in addition to “wife” and “husband” because the latter two options can exclude nonbinary people.

Resources

- Human Rights Campaign provides [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions](#), as well as an extensive [Glossary of Terms](#).

Use This	Avoid This
intersex	hermaphrodite
assigned [male/female] at birth	born [male/female]
male, female	Male, Female
transgender (adj.)	transgender (n.), transgendered
first-year student(s)	freshman, freshmen

humankind, people (this is gender-neutral language)	mankind, manpower (this is gendered language)
they (singular—either as a person’s pronoun or to refer to one individual if their gender isn’t known)	he/she, he or she, him or her
pronouns, gender pronouns	preferred pronouns (pronouns are not preferences; they are the words that accurately describe a person)
alum (n., singular), alumni (n., plural), alumni (adjective), graduate (n.)	alumnus, alumna, alumnae
[specific sex and gender]	the other sex, the other gender (language that implies only two options)

LGBTQIA+

The letters in the acronym refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/agender. The acronym includes dimensions of sexual orientation and gender, and the term is used broadly to refer to people in any of these communities.

EDUCAUSE hosts an [LGBTQIA in IT Community Group](#).

“Gay” and “queer” are often considered interchangeable, though using “gay” broadly can be interpreted as disregarding lesbian, bisexual, and other LGBTQIA+ identities. “Queer” is generally more inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people besides gay men, but “queer” was long used derisively, and sometimes still is, so use carefully. Many members of the LGBTQIA+ community embrace the word “queer” in an effort to reclaim it on their own terms.

Resources

- GLAAD provides a useful [Media Reference Guide](#).

Use This	Avoid This
sexual orientation	sexual preference, lifestyle
straight, heterosexual (as adjectives)	traditional
gay, lesbian, queer (but refer to note above)	homosexual, alternative

Race/Ethnicity

Talking about race and ethnicity can be especially difficult. The English language includes countless terms that are used explicitly as racial and ethnic slurs, as well as numerous terms that carry derogatory connotations. Complicating matters, some people use “race” and “ethnicity” as synonyms, while others insist they are distinct.

According to a [BBC video](#), “Latino/Latina” refers to geography, and “Hispanic” refers to language. People can be Latino/Latina, Hispanic, or both, depending where they or their ancestors are from. If you know which term is most appropriate or is preferred by the people being described, use that term, understanding that all are acceptable. Some use the term “Latinx” to avoid the gendered language of “Latino/Latina,” though many [find the term offensive or inappropriate](#). Another term that some prefer is “Latine,” and we will also use and allow this term.

Similarly, the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) can be polarizing. Some [prefer it](#), while others argue that it [reinforces long-standing inequities](#) and creates new ones by highlighting Black and Indigenous people while making no mention of people of other ethnicities. And it is sometimes [thought to refer to bisexual people of color](#). If a broad term is needed, person/people of color (POC) or student(s) of color (SOC) is preferred, but many individuals and groups now use “BIPOC” extensively.

Many terms are used in broad, indistinct ways when specificity would be preferable. For example, the term “Asian” covers an enormous range of ethnicities and cultures from a vast geographical area, and although the term isn’t generally considered offensive, its imprecision can be problematic. “Indigenous” is a broad term that can refer to native people from anywhere (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc.). Again, more precision is better, such as “Native American,” “members of the Cherokee Nation,” “Alaska Native,” or “Native Hawaiian.” Although some Native Americans identify as “Indians” or “American Indians,” the term “[Indian](#)” is generally considered inappropriate. Similarly, “African American” and “Black” are not synonymous. An individual might identify as Afro-Latino or Afro-Caribbean, for instance, or Haitian American or Jamaican American. If race/ethnicity is warranted in a description and you are able to ask, find out how people prefer to be identified. In all situations, be as specific as possible.

EDUCAUSE will capitalize “Black,” “White,” and “Brown” when referring to racial/ethnic groups, which follows [guidance in the Style Guide from the National Association of Black Journalists](#) and other style guides. We will use these terms as adjectives (e.g., Black faculty, White students), not as nouns. We acknowledge different points of view about capitalizing “White” and agree that the term should be lowercase in terms such as “white supremacy.” Similar debates surround the capitalization of “Brown,” with some contending that the term is used as [a broad catchall for too many groups of people to be useful](#). Usages for these terms are shifting, and we will continue to monitor changes.

Various terms are used to refer to a person's status or position in social contexts, terms such as "minority," "minoritized," "marginalized," "underrepresented," "underserved," and "nontraditional." These terms are the subject of an ongoing and energetic debate and should be used carefully, understanding that specificity is beneficial—instead of referring to "minorities" or "minoritized students," identify the specific group being discussed and the fact or finding (e.g., underrepresented in STEM disciplines). Many also consider the term "[at risk](#)" to be inappropriate.

Terms that relate to race/ethnicity should be used as adjectives, not as nouns—for example, say "Black students and faculty" rather than "Blacks on campus."

Resources

- Refer to the APA's [Racial and Ethnic Identity](#) page for guidance.
- The Council of Science Editors provides a web page on [Inclusive Language: Race and Ethnicity](#).

Use This	Avoid This
Black people, White people	black people, white people (caps for Black and White), Blacks, Whites (don't use as nouns)
African American	African-American
legacy, preexisting	grandfathered (note that the term is problematic primarily because of race)
Latino, Latina, Latine	Latinx
students from diverse backgrounds	diverse students
person/people of color (POC), student(s) of color (SOC) (these are preferred, but BIPOC is acceptable)	non-White
multiracial, multiethnic	mixed, mixed race
Asian (but keep in mind the comments above about specificity)	Oriental
cheat	gyp
Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)	
Historically Black Colleges and Universities	

(HBCUs)	
Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)	
Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)	

Ability/Disability

Although the term “disability” denotes a lack of some ability, don’t frame discussions in those terms. Don’t speak about people being *confined* to a wheelchair or *suffering* from blindness. People aren’t *victims* of a disease or disability. Don’t “heroize” people with disabilities or say they are successful *despite* a disability. Don’t use terms such as “normal” or “healthy” to describe people without disabilities.

Avoid calling disabilities “conditions” or characterizing them as problems. They are the facts of people’s lives and are different from what other people experience, but they don’t make anyone more or less of a person. Recognize difference for what it is—dissimilarity—and nothing more. Remember that many disabilities—cognitive and physical—are invisible.

Accessible web design involves a broad range of considerations that fall outside the scope of this guide, but some dimensions of accessible web design do intersect with issues related to language, particularly in the area of instructions. If a resource directs users to “a red button,” that can pose a problem for a colorblind user; directing users to “a red Submit button” would avoid that problem. An awareness of the subtle ways in which language overlooks certain users will help in the creation of content that enables everyone to participate equitably.

Resources

- The ADA National Network provides a clear set of [guidelines for writing about people with disabilities](#).
- The National Center on Disability and Journalism has created an [extensive style guide](#) covering terminology and usage.

Use This	Avoid This
living with (a disability or diagnosis)	suffering from
person/people without disabilities	able bodied
person/people with disability/disabilities	the disabled (n.), differently abled
uses a wheelchair, is a wheelchair user	wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair

has a disability	is handicapped
blind, legally blind, low vision	visually impaired
Deaf (the community), deaf (audiological status), partial hearing loss, hard of hearing	hearing impaired
has a learning disability	dumb, slow learner
complicated, wild, absurd	crazy, insane
a problematic webinar, a malware-infected system	lame, crippled, cripple (v.) (to describe objects or activities)

Socioeconomics

Bias can creep into discussions surrounding socioeconomics because income is sometimes characterized as being a function of ability or initiative. Be aware of subtle cues that hint at false connections. Avoid framing discussions in terms of privilege; focus instead on differences and implications.

Resources

- The DC Fiscal Policy Institute has developed a [Style Guide for Inclusive Language](#) that provides useful guidance in this area.

Use This	Avoid This
low-income, people experiencing poverty	poor, impoverished
people experiencing homelessness	homeless (n.)
emerging economy (when possible, name the country)	third-world country , developing country

Ageism

Ageism ascribes certain qualities—positive or negative—to people based on their age. Although age discrimination is often considered to be something that affects older individuals, ageism can harm a person of any age by making assumptions about that person's abilities, attitudes, preferences, or experiences.

Resources

- AARP offers a [list of ageist terminology](#).
- The Silver Century Foundation provides guidance about [how to avoid ageist language](#).
- The Conscious Style Guide offers insights into the ways [ageism affects younger people](#).

Use This	Avoid This
Gen X, Gen Y / Millennial, Gen Z (but refer to this article for an argument against using “generation” labels at all)	digital native
older, experienced, people over [age]	elderly, senior citizen, senior (n.), of a certain age
youth, young person, teen/teenager/preteen	immature, childish

IT Terminology

Some terminology that has been incorporated into IT labels and tools has discriminatory and offensive roots. For example, the term “penetration test” has sexual undertones, and the use of “male” and “female” to refer to cable connectors can be similarly offensive. If such terms must be used, be aware of the sensitivity.

Members of the community have identified other words as terms to avoid when possible, including “white paper,” “webmaster,” “scrum master,” and “master service agreement,” understanding that alternative terms—such as “topic paper” or “main service agreement”—are not always direct synonyms.

Resources

- The University of California, Irvine has put together an [Inclusive IT Language Guide](#) that covers many of these issues.
- The Research Education Networks Information Sharing and Analysis Center (REN-ISAC) has released a guide for [Using Inclusive Language in IT](#).
- A [blog post](#) from Localization Lab explains why some tech terms are offensive.

Use This	Avoid This
allow, allowlist, safe senders list, disallow, disallowlist, denylist, blocklist	whitelist, blacklist
primary/secondary, main/subordinate	master/slave
perimeter network	demilitarized zone (DMZ)
placeholder value	dummy value
ethical hacking, security assessment test (but in some cases the particular meaning of “penetration test” requires that term)	penetration test
plug, socket/jack, connector and receptacle, pin and receptacle	male, female (when referring to cable connectors)

Appendix: Revision History

Date	Revision	Description
8/23/2023	1.7	Added a short paragraph about instructions, such as for web pages, that can exclude certain users.
6/28/2023	1.6	Added language in the introduction to explain the intent of this guide and what it is not explicitly designed to be; added more alternatives for “male” and “female” when referring to cables and connectors; added “crazy” and “insane” as terms to avoid; noted that “ladies,” “gals,” “girls,” and “guys” are rarely appropriate; added a note about the need to include “spouse” and “partner” to forms that otherwise only have “wife” and “husband” as options.
4/10/2023	1.5	Added “Native Hawaiian” to p. 5. Will now use/allow the term “Latine.” Added a note about the capitalization of “Black,” “White,” and “Brown.”
02/17/2022	1.4	Added notes about the use of “Latine” and several IT-related terms that can be offensive; added a copyright line and assigned a Creative Commons license.

01/12/2022	1.3	Shortened the title; clarified the guidance about person-first language; added links to other resources (APA, REN-ISAC, Localization Lab); added “graduate” as term to use; clarified that “grandfathered” is based on race, not age; added “Asian” (use) and “oriental” (avoid); added “differently abled” as a term to avoid; added “gyp” as a term to avoid; removed “hard of hearing” as a term to avoid; added “allowlist,” “disallowlist,” and “denylist” (use); added “penetration test” and the use of “male” and “female” to refer to cable connectors as terms to avoid.
10/22/2021	1.2	Added a link to an article that encourages not using “generation” labels.
8/26/2021	1.1	Added sentence in intro about hypersensitivity; clarified gender-neutral versus gendered language; added comment that pronouns are not preferences; added “multiracial” and “multiethnic” as words to use and “mixed” and “mixed race” as terms to avoid; added MSI; added note that people are not “victims”; added “people experiencing poverty” and “emerging economy”
8/18/2021	1.0	First full draft of guide

© 2021–2025 EDUCAUSE. This guide is licensed under a [Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).